

# HOME CINEMA

HIGH-PERFORMANCE SOUND & VISION

## Choice

**EXCLUSIVE!**  
Is Krell's new AV  
processor the  
best yet?



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# 55in TV shootout!

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Samsung Blu-ray player  
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**INSIDE** YAMAHA FLAGSHIP SEPARATES → READER'S SYSTEM → TOP TEN  
GEAR GUIDE → ULTRAVIOLET R.I.P.? → TOSHIBA'S SUB-£100 BLU-RAY DECK

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# HOME CINEMA Choice

www.homecinemachoice.com

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If you don't want  
to miss an issue



Samsung  
85in TV!  
p68



# WELCOME

A few years ago I was moaning to a representative of an AV receiver brand that their product only offered four HDMI inputs. They were miffed that I could possibly need more. A year later the brand returned with six inputs, by which time I'd decided I could do with at least seven. Three cheers, then, for Krell's new high-end Foundation processor (reviewed on p18), which offers ten HDMI jacks.

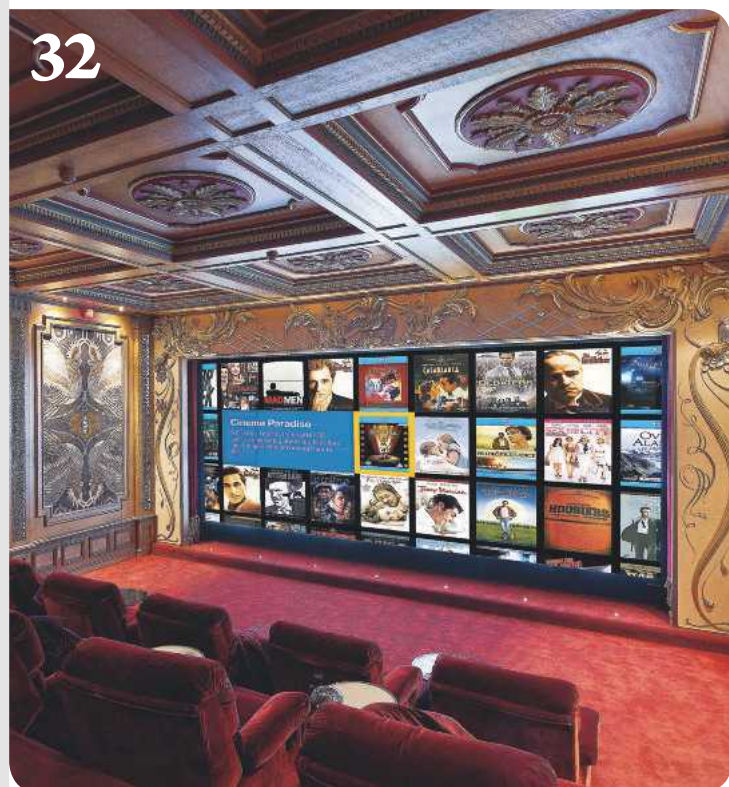


A good home cinema product will always provide what the owner wants, even if they don't necessarily need it. **This is why I'm so excited by Ultra HD TVs, despite there still being no actual UHD video standard.** Like the plethora of HDMI inputs on my AVR, I know at some point I will make use of a screen's 3,840 x 2,160 resolution, beyond mere upscaling. That's why this issue we've tweaked the specifications listed for TVs. We no longer tell you if it's Full HD – we tell you if it isn't Ultra HD. Because we know you want it.

*Mark Craven*  
Editor



# MENU



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# ROCK STEADY...



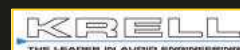
Since its inception, home theatre has presented tasks to high-end audio designers that challenge them in ways not seen before in a two-channel, analogue milieu. Digital surround sound processing directly confronted traditionalist music lovers, too, who felt that it compromised the purity of true high-end performance.

The wizards at Krell responded with a "clean sheet" approach, by delivering home theatre control centres to satisfy all purist criteria. The Foundation 7.1-Channel AV Processor is the latest in that long line, offering everything needed to master today's myriad viewing formats – from Blu-ray to 3D pass-through to TVs with built-in streaming – while maintaining Krell's exacting standards for analogue audio reproduction.



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# BULLETIN

→ **News Highlights** **DYNAUDIO** Affordable loudspeaker range is guaranteed to Excite  
**YOUVIEW** Platform upgrade opens the way for 'an infinite number' of IPTV channels **ULTRAVIOLET**  
 Digital movie tech still struggling in the UK **BOSE** Premium audio brand goes portable **NEWS X10**  
 The hottest news in bite-size chunks **IRON MAN 3** Heroic Blu-ray on the way **AND MUCH MORE!**

## Divide and conquer

Yamaha CX-A5000 & MX-A5000 → [uk.yamaha.com](http://uk.yamaha.com)



Yamaha has taken the wraps off its upcoming Aventure AV separates. The 11.2-channel CX-A5000 preamp boasts 33 DSP listening modes and dual high-performance 192kHz/32-bit DACs, while the 11-channel MX-A5000 power amp promises 150W per channel and the option of five-channel bi-amping. Both flagship components also utilise a high-rigidity chassis designed to eliminate vibrations for greater sound purity. The CX-A5000 and MX-A5000 are set to arrive in the UK in September, priced £2,500 each. Consider us excited...

**HCC ONLINE...**

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at [www.homecinemachoice.com](http://www.homecinemachoice.com) Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

# Exciting times

Dynaudio Excite → [www.dynaudio.com](http://www.dynaudio.com)

Dynaudio's new Excite speaker range claims to offer high-quality audio at an affordable level, with prices starting at £750 for a pair of the X14 standmounts. Other models are the X24 centre channel and X34 and X38 floorstanders, meaning a multichannel system can be assembled. Finishes include black and white satin lacquers and real-wood veneers, and all use proprietary Dynaudio drivers.





## Google TV refreshed



Remember Google TV, the Smart TV platform co-developed by Sony, Intel and Logitech? No?

Well, we don't blame you, given the wealth of Smart platforms offered on every bit of new AV kit these days. However, Sony is evidently keen to keep the Google TV fire burning with the release of the NSZ-GS8 set-top box. A subtle update of last year's NSZ-GS7, the NSZ-GS8 now includes a microphone for voice control functionality. It's also £50 cheaper than its predecessor, shipping with a £130 price tag. [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)

## High-end AVR duo



August will see the arrival of two new 9.2-channel AV receivers from Pioneer.

The THX Ultra2 Plus-certified SC-LX87 (£2,000) and SC-LX77 (£1,600) sit at the top of the company's 2013 range and have both been sonically tuned at AIR Studios in London. They also incorporate Pioneer's latest Direct Energy HD amplifiers built on Class D technology and feature 4K video passthrough and upscaling, 192kHz/32-bit audio upscaling, multizone capability and support for the iControlAV2013 app. [www.pioneer.co.uk](http://www.pioneer.co.uk)

## Brighter thinking



Optoma has launched a new high-brightness version of its

well-received HD25 projector for living room environments. The HD25-LV delivers 3,200 ANSI Lumens brightness (compared to the 2,000 figure of its forebear). Lamp life is rated at up to 6,000 hours, while Optoma claims a 20,000:1 contrast ratio courtesy of its Dynamic Black technology. A Full HD, 3D DLP model, the HD25-LV also packs a 16W stereo speaker array, which should sound better than some other PJ squawkers. [www.optoma.co.uk](http://www.optoma.co.uk)

# YouView gets IPTV upgrade

Platform revamp allows service 'an infinite number' of IPTV channels

YouView is getting its first major upgrade since launching a year ago. The digital TV platform, backed by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Five, TalkTalk, BT and Arqiva already combines over-the-air Freeview HD with internet-delivered catch-up and Now TV subscription video-on-demand. However, the upgrade will allow it to deliver 'an infinite number' of internet TV channels in the future.

CEO Richard Halton told *HCC* that this influx of new IPTV will only be available on BT and TalkTalk branded set-top boxes to begin with. However, retail editions of the YouView box will receive the update before the end of the year. Channel specifics have yet to be confirmed.

Just as with its blended delivery of IPTV and over-the-air channels, the new internet services will be incorporated within the set-top box's programme guide. Demonstrations given to *HCC* of both standard-definition and HD 'net channels were impressive, with little obvious picture difference from channels already available. Initially, viewers will not be able to pause or record the new IPTV services, although



**Richard Halton:** 'YouView was designed to be a linear and seamless on-demand product experience. We make it very easy'

Director of Product for YouView, Susie Buckridge, says this functionality will be added at a later date. 'The biggest challenge we

faced integrating internet into the box was finding a way to help viewers discover all these new channels,' Buckridge told us. 'We've been working hard to bring them into our programme guide and search features, alongside over-the-air and on-demand services. 'For many viewers, the only indication that a channel is internet rather than aerial-delivered is a trio of telltale dots by the channel name.

## Video-on-demand is in demand

The move to more IPTV reflects how people are now using TV, explains Halton. He notes the service is now delivering 2.2m VOD plays per week: 'That's a very big number. This shows something going from being a marginal activity that's complimentary to traditional linear TV, to being a major part of people's mainstream TV viewing experience.'

YouView says it now reaches 400,000 homes, the majority of which are via its partnerships with ISP giants BT and TalkTalk. The latter accounts for 230,000 subscribers. While the company declines to provide a precise breakdown of remaining figures, it admits the number of BT viewers is comparable with those from TalkTalk.

Obviously, this leaves only a small percentage of YouView boxes actually being sold via shops. However, Halton isn't worried about this and says that it's 'in line with its expectations.'



YouView offers seamless integration of IPTV



## PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

### Cloud Atlas (All-region BD)



Eye-wateringly beautiful 1080p imagery and immaculately crafted DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio make this time-jumping, genre-hopping epic all the more spectacular on Blu-ray.

### Kuroneko (Region B BD)



Eureka's sympathetic hi-def release is sure to scare up some new fans for Kaneto Shindo's eerie 1968 Japanese ghost story.

### Nashville: Season One (R2 DVD)



This overwrought show about rival country music singers is up there with *Desperate Housewives* in the guilty pleasure stakes.

### Horrors of the Black Museum (R2 DVD)



Recently re-released on DVD, this notorious 1959 British horror has lost none of its ability to shock.

### Panty & Stocking... (Region B BD)



A belated, but thoroughly well deserved, hi-def outing for this hilariously irreverent anime series. Equally bonkers and brilliant.

## EXTRAS...

Small items that make a big impression

### Man of Steel: Inside the World of Superman



The official companion to the year's biggest superhero blockbuster, this £30 hardback serves up a cornucopia of stunning concept art and on-set photography accompanied by commentary from the filmmakers.

### Sanus iPad Mini Mount



Tired of having to hold your iPad Mini in your hands? Then why not try Sanus' £90 VTM11 iPad Mini Mount that

allows a variety of standmount and magnetic fixing options.

### Pacific Rim: Man, Machines & Monsters



Priced around £30, this hardback explores the making of sci-fi

blockbuster *Pacific Rim* through concept art, behind-the-scenes photos and interviews.

### Batman: Arkham City – Escape



This two-player board game pits Batman against 40 of

his most iconic (not to mention deadly) enemies. Yours for £35.

# UK disc sales get positive spin

...but UltraViolet may have missed its chance, warns industry summit

With its mixture of consumer research and industry speakers, the annual Futuresource Entertainment Summit has become one of the key tools for gauging the health of the home entertainment market in the UK and predicting where it may be heading in the coming years.

FES 2013 saw a new twist added to the event – a live online community of 40 consumers who would be able to offer almost immediate feedback on the topics and questions under discussion. While this enabled Futuresource Consulting to come up with some fairly alarmist headlines for the various industry panels and speakers to discuss ('One in three of our consumer respondents has stopped buying DVDs and Blu-rays'), in truth the over-riding feeling about physical media sales in the UK was far more positive.

Speaking as part of the 'Tackling the Challenge in the Video Industry' panel discussion, Dan Gopal (SVP, global digital media and home entertainment, ITV Studios) summed up the overall mood: 'It's definitely a declining business, we all realise that. But it's still a very large business in decline, so it's about what we can do to prolong and sustain it for as long as possible.'

Gopal's fellow panellists went even further. 'I think we're in an encouraging situation right now. The decline in sales is actually tailing off and what we're seeing is that Blu-ray still has big growth. From our point of view the future is much rosier than the press would say,' claimed Magnus Hollo (managing director, Sony Pictures Entertainment).

Meanwhile, Colin Lomax (managing director, Anchor Bay) was pleased with the continuing resilience of disc sales in the UK. 'If you think about what has happened in the past four or five years – HMV, Woolworths, Virgin, Zavvi – so many high street retailers have gone to the wall. Yet this year, while the



**Colin Lomax (2nd from right):** 'UltraViolet still has a long way to go before we crack it. Walk down the high street and ask people what they think it is and they'd probably say a tanning salon'

market is selling about 4.7 per cent down in volume sales, it's up about seven per cent in value.'

### Consumer confusion

However, the feeling wasn't quite so upbeat when it came to the subject of the UltraViolet digital movie service. Despite the fact that Sony Pictures has been a key proponent of UV, even Hollo had to admit that, 'we probably still haven't got the kick-start we need yet to get it to the same level it is in the US.'

Anchor Bay's Lomax was even more pragmatic. 'Walk down to the high street and ask people what they think UltraViolet is and they'll probably say it's a tanning salon... I think as a concept it's great. But if we don't crack it as an industry soon then we'll have lost the chance.'

The live consumer feedback proved that Lomax's fear was painfully accurate. Most of the participants were completely unaware of what UltraViolet is, and some of those who had heard of it believed it to be a new x-ray or radiation technology, or even a 'way to improve the making of a disc.'

# Two years in the making...

Revel claims new loudspeaker line has been 'fine-tuned to perfection'

Following two years of testing and refinement, Revel has introduced a new range of high-calibre home cinema loudspeakers.

The range consists of nine models: the three-way F208 and F206 floorstanders; the two-way M106 and M105 bookshelf monitors; the three-way C208 and two-way C205 centre speakers; the two-way S206 surround speaker; and the B112 and B110 powered subwoofers. Prices range from £1,400 for a pair of the M105s to £4,650 for two of the flagship F208s.

Aluminium cones are employed throughout the lineup, with the 1in dome tweeters using a proprietary

Acoustic Lens Waveguide designed to optimise imaging and dispersion. Each speaker is also individually calibrated against a manufacturing reference standard to ensure consistent performance, says Revel.

The curved and contoured enclosures feature internal damping and bracing, gold-plated binding posts and are available in a choice of high-gloss real-wood and automotive-grade painted finishes.

**Revel's Performa3 M105 monitor use a 1in tweeter and 5.25in bass driver**







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## DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

## → JULY

**29: Welcome to the Punch**

James McAvoy and Mark Strong star as men on either side of the law who must work together in this police thriller. Catch it on DVD and BD. [www.entertainmentone.co.uk](http://www.entertainmentone.co.uk)

## → AUGUST

**02: The Conjuring**

*Saw* and *Insidious* director James Wan is hoping to scare up a Summer box office bonanza as his latest

supernatural shocker creeps into cinemas across the UK. [www.warnerbros.co.uk](http://www.warnerbros.co.uk)

**05: Battlestar Galactica: Blood & Chrome**

Head back to the days of the First Cylon War as this ten-episode internet prequel to the critically-acclaimed sci-fi series finally touches down on Blu-ray and DVD in the UK. [www.universalpictures.co.uk](http://www.universalpictures.co.uk)

**07: Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa**

Aha! Radio and TV superstar Alan Partridge makes the jump to the big screen today with this action-packed tale of a hostage siege at the North Norfolk Digital radio station. [www.studiocanal.co.uk](http://www.studiocanal.co.uk)

**09: The Lone Ranger**

Johnny Depp and Gore Verbinski are hoping to re-capture the magic of the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* when this blockbuster take on the masked Western hero hits cinemas. [www.disney.co.uk](http://www.disney.co.uk)

**14: Kick-Ass 2**

Considering that Jim Carrey has now expressed regret over appearing in this sequel due to the violence it contains, we have higher hopes than ever for this controversial sequel. In UK cinemas from today. [www.universalpictures.co.uk](http://www.universalpictures.co.uk)

**19: Time Bandits**

Terry Gilliam's cult favourite returns to Blu-ray with a brand-new hi-def transfer and loads of bonus features. The transfer is based on a director-approved 2K restoration taken from the original camera negatives. [www.arrowfilms.co.uk](http://www.arrowfilms.co.uk)

**22: HCC #225**

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. [www.homecinemachoice.com](http://www.homecinemachoice.com)

# Bose launches Mini speaker

Luxury AV brand expands into affordable and portable new sectors

Premium AV specialist Bose has proved an old dog can learn new tricks. Long famed for its high-end speaker and television ranges, the US company is celebrating its 51st year with the launch of two new products that will 'usher in a new era of mobile audio' and allow the company to 'deliver mobile audio like never before,' according to Bose Training Manager Dan Bains.

The SoundLink Mini enters the hugely competitive Bluetooth speaker market. At 180 x 58 x 50mm and 680g, the Mini is 30 per cent smaller and 50 per cent lighter than the company's previously smallest speaker, the SoundLink Mobile. And with a retail price of £170, it's also 30 per cent cheaper.

Construction is impressive, with a rugged anodised aluminium housing and a pair of passive radiators and two custom-designed transducers powering the audio; Bose claims the transducers move twice the air as conventional designs. Audio can be delivered to the speaker wirelessly using Bluetooth with A2DP for enhanced bass response or using a wired auxiliary cable.

Somewhat surprisingly the Mini lacks the AptX codec which allows the streaming of high-bitrate (320Kbps) audio, but our time with the speaker suggests that it is still capable of delivering a warm and fulsome



**Dan Bains:** 'These two products usher in a new era of mobile audio and we can now deliver mobile audio like never before'

sound. Bose also promises an unusually high 12-hour battery life over Bluetooth and a contact-based charging dock.

## Noise cancelling

Also launched are the QuietComfort 20 earphones, representing the first time Bose has adapted its noise cancelling tech from overhead to in-ear 'phones.

The system works using two tiny microphones fitted inside each bud – one to sense environmental noise, the other to measure music volume. A chip within the earphone's control module calculates equal and opposite noise cancellation within a fraction of a second, and its internal battery lasts up to 16 hours. When flat the £260 earphones operate as standard, passive earphones.

From an initial listen, the QuietComfort 20 impressed. Low and midrange external noise was eradicated particularly well and audio was both detailed and packed plenty of depth. This model is

Apple product specific, but there's also an identical '20i' variant for Android and other devices.



Bose goes mobile with its affordable SoundLink Mini



## Four-channel CI amp



Audio guru Parasound has added

a new half-rack width power amplifier to its growing range of custom install components. The four-channel/two-zone Zamp Quattro is rated at 4 x 50W (into 8 ohms) via its Class D amplifiers and will retail for around £650.

'We expect installers will find creative uses for the Zamp Quattro,' says Parasound president Richard Schram, 'For example, four Zamp Quattros provides 16 channels of quality amplification in just two rack spaces.' [www.parasound.com](http://www.parasound.com)

## Sharp debuts TV trio



Sharp has bolstered its line-up of TVs with the introduction of three new LE751 Series Aquos

LED models. Available in a choice of 39in, 50in and 60in screen sizes, the models feature Active Motion 200Hz technology and the new Aquos Net+ portal, which provides an open internet browser as well as the usual apps and VOD services. The company has also launched a new remote control app for iOS and Android platforms, allowing users to operate the LE751 Series TV via their smartphones and tablets. [www.sharp.co.uk](http://www.sharp.co.uk)

## Extend your power



AV accessories specialist Russ Andrews has introduced a new

dedicated AV mains extension. The PowerBar is available with four, six or eight sockets, each of which are individually wired with a 'high performance' cable. The slim-line, wall-mountable design also makes it ideal for use in constrained spaces. Prices start at £90 for the four-socket version, rising to £150 for the eight-socket variant. They come with a 60-day home trial money-back guarantee. [www.russandrews.com](http://www.russandrews.com)



This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



## 1 Doctoring your system

The Wand Company has announced that it will be releasing two new *Doctor Who*-themed universal remote controls this October to tie-in with the show's 50th anniversary. First up is a version modelled on the Tenth Doctor's sonic screwdriver – which required the company borrowing the actual prop from David Tennant to do a 3D computer scan. Also on the cards is a limited edition gold- and silver-plated version of the Eleventh Doctor's tool. Expect to pay around £70 and £120 respectively.

## 2 Harmonious partnership

Logitech has had a change of heart over its plan to ditch its Harmony remote control brand. At the launch of its smartphone-based Logitech Harmony Ultimate Hub, the company stated that it now 'plans to retain ownership of the Harmony remote product line,' describing it as being 'in the best interest of shareholders.'

## 3 Microsoft backtracks

Responding to overwhelming criticism following the launch announcement, Microsoft has had a change of heart and revealed that the Xbox One will no longer require users to be 'always online' in order to play games and that there will be no restrictions on trading-in, lending and renting games for the console.

## 4 Catch-up TV on the rise

New research conducted by YouView to mark the platform's first birthday claims that catch-up/VOD services now account for a fifth of British TV viewing. This is based on average figures of 16 hours live TV, nine hours recorded and six hours catch-up per week for the 2,000+ adults who participated in the online survey.

## 5 Budget 4K TV hits US

Seiki Digital used June's CE Week technology showcase in New York to launch the smallest and cheapest Ultra HD TV we've ever encountered. The SE39UY04 boasts a 39in screen and retails for just \$700 – sadly there are currently no plans to sell it outside of the US.

## 6 The Force is with film stock

*Star Wars: Episode VII* director J.J. Abrams is the latest filmmaker to come out in favour of shooting on film rather than digitally.

Speaking at the PGA's (Producers Guild of America) Produced by Conference in L.A., Abrams stated, 'If film were to go away – and digital is challenging it – then the standard for the highest, best quality would go away.'

## 7 Hollywood faces 'implosion'

Blockbuster movie specialists George Lucas and Steven Spielberg have warned that Hollywood faces an 'implosion' that could change the shape of the industry forever and lead to dramatically inflated cinema ticket prices. The duo shared their misgivings with film students while discussing the difficulties they had in getting their latest films (*Red Tails* and *Lincoln*) into cinemas.

## 8 Certified 4K

Technicolor has launched a 4K certification program to address the issues of 4K upscaling and how non-4K content from streaming services, disc players and broadcast platforms will look on Ultra HD TVs. Marseille Networks' VTV-122X video processors were the first recipients of the certification.

## 9 PS4 price announced

Sony has announced that its PlayStation 4 console will significantly undercut the RRP of Microsoft's Xbox One when it goes on sale in the UK this Christmas. With a ticket of just £350, the PS4 will cost UK consumers £80 less than Microsoft's next-gen console.

## 10 Kaleidescape Store expands into UK

Kaleidescape has brought its movie download store to the UK. The service allows Kaleidescape system owners to download movies in 'Blu-ray quality' with 1080p imagery



accompanied by Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio lossless soundtracks with 'bitrates matching physical media'. Warner Bros. is the first studio to licence content for the UK platform, providing more than 400 films and 450 TV episodes.

## PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

### Avenging Downey Jr.

While he's still not committed to doing any more standalone *Iron Man* films, it's been confirmed that Robert Downey Jr. will at least be reprising the role of Tony Stark in two more *Avengers* movies.

### Smith too pricey to stop aliens a second time



Don't expect to see Will Smith punching aliens again when the long-awaited *ID4* sequel finally hits screens, following director Roland Emmerich's claim that Smith is 'too expensive'. However, it appears that Smith's co-stars Jeff Goldblum and Bill Pullman are still relatively cheap, with the filmmaker adding that both are 'on board so far.'

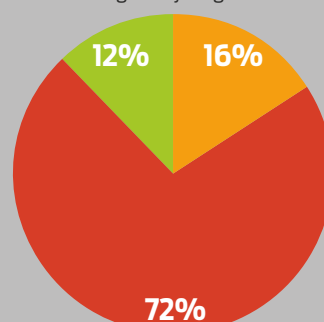
### Climb the Ladder again

Adrian Lyne's 1990 psychological chiller *Jacob's Ladder* is the latest flick to be lined up for the remake treatment. The script by *Midnight Meat Train* screenwriter Jeff Buhler is described as 'more akin to a homage' than a straight remake.

## WE ASKED...

Have your neighbours ever complained about the sound from your home cinema system?

Yes No  
I haven't got any neighbours



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Go online for more polling action



# Stark raving mad

Iron Man 3 → Walt Disney Home Entertainment → All-region BD/R2 DVD



The second phase of Marvel Studios' cinematic superhero universe kicks off on September 9 with the UK Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray and DVD release of *Iron Man 3*. Re-teaming Robert Downey Jr. with *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* director Shane Black, the thrilling three-quel finds Tony Stark (and

his superhero alter ego) struggling to come to terms with a post-*Avengers Assemble* world and battling his most fearsome adversary yet – high-tech terrorist The Mandarin. Blockbuster Blu-ray demo discs don't come more highly anticipated that this...





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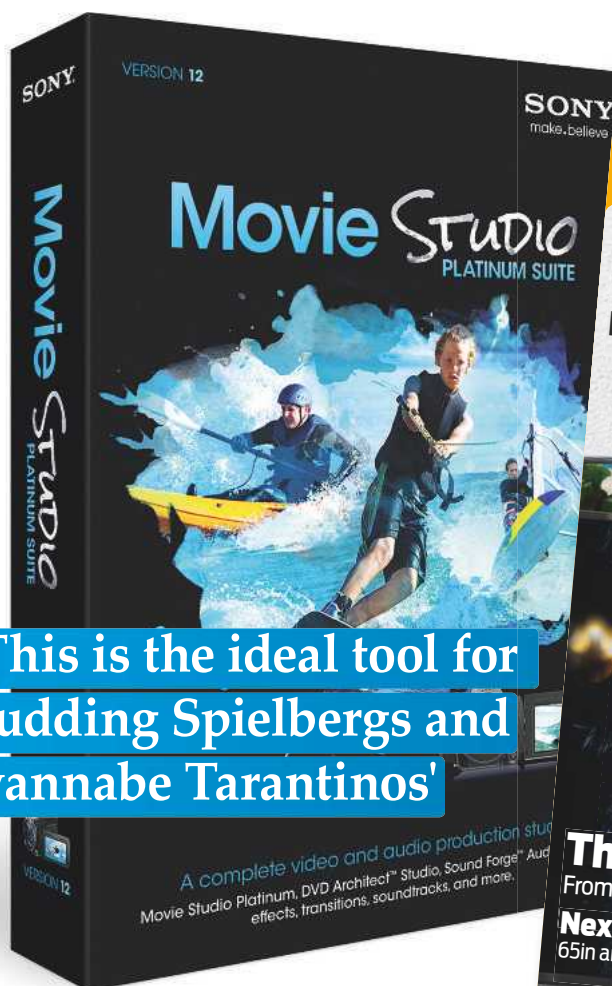
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to achieve than ever, and you can use the surround sound mixing tools of the Sound Forge Audio Studio to tweak your movies' sonics to perfection. The possibilities are endless!

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**I**n our world exclusive review, the new Foundation processor from American AV specialist Krell proves the brand's commitment to uncompromised quality hasn't faltered



**EVERY NOW AND** again something comes along that is so focused and so madly different from the mainstream that it stands in a category virtually of its own. While the big Japanese brands cram ever more licensed and bespoke home cinema technology into ever cheaper AV receivers, there are brands that just refuse to choose the same inevitable path – a path that logically can only lead to a reduction in outright performance as R&D cash is poured into features, logos and gadgetry rather than sound quality. Not so Krell. The brand has always been about

no-compromise performance and always will be. For that reason Krell is my muse, my aspiration and my desire – despite coming from the wrong side of the Atlantic.

So it was with a hefty bump down to earth that half-an-hour into reviewing the sumptuous new Krell Foundation AV processor that I found myself confused, frustrated and bleeding all over the sofa. Thankfully the feeling didn't last for long but it was a shaky start.

In my haste to unbox the beast and revel in its heavyweight build, superb connection portfolio and drop-dead gorgeous design,



Audio-holic  
**Richard  
Stevenson** is at  
his happiest when  
he's knee-deep  
in power amps,  
processors and  
balanced  
XLR cables



a sharp rear-facing corner of the fascia took a chunk out of my thumb and I was dealing with altogether the wrong sort of claret spillage. So, put a plaster on and start again.

#### Designed to dazzle

The Foundation processor might be Krell's entry-level device but it has spectacular presence on the rack. The fascia is gloriously textured satin black with bright metallic silver in the central portion and, powered up, the menacing red glow from behind the curved logo plate turns bright

blue. The display is a two-line dot matrix affair in a subtle hue and defaults to off, coming back on instantly when you swap inputs or tweak any settings.

At £6,500 the Foundation is considerably less expensive than the previous Krell processor we auditioned (the £13,000 S-1200U), despite featuring much of the same internal hardware. A chunk of the saving is financed by ditching the former's milled aluminium cosmetics, but I'm not that fussed. Yes, the Foundation's paint is a bit prone to picking up dust and finger marks, and the silver >





Rear-panel connections include nine HDMI inputs and balanced XLR jacks

paint is not as lush as solid aluminium, but the overall look is pure, purposeful beauty.

The rear panel is arguably even more appealing. There are no less than nine v1.4 HDMI inputs, plus fully-balanced XLR outputs for seven channels and two subwoofers, comprehensive trigger ports and plenty of analogue inputs. A tenth HDMI input graces the front panel, and all boast Krell's Intelligent HDMI switching. This memorises HDMI sources, including handshaking and resolution information, making swapping between inputs instantaneous and without the few seconds of blank screen most AVRs require to re-sync to a new HDMI source. It works well too, with barely a flicker as you scroll between inputs.

The analogue video inputs are all transcoded to HDMI, while the HDMI inputs themselves offer pure

passthrough of 3D and 1080p signals (but not 4K, which could prove a disappointment to early adopters). There is no video processing here and no onscreen GUI, meaning setup is purely through the two-line front-panel display and that is where the confusion comes in.

More of which later.

This processor does not boast THX badges, upscaling, smart networking features, USB inputs, media streaming or height and width channels, but the key performance parts are all present and correct. The huge power supplies, 32-bit DSPs, 32-bit Sabre DACs and high-end analogue output stages are the stuff of audiophile dreams.

The Foundation proved spectacularly easy to install in my system, as I simply swapped the XLR, HDMI and network cables straight over from my Denon AVP-A1HD. As tested, the Krell drove

five Sony TA-N1 stereo power amps (three bi-amping the front three channels), a Tannoy Dimension seven-channel speaker package and a pair of Velodyne DD18+ subwoofers. Somewhat less extreme systems are available, including the excellent Krell S-1500 multichannel power amplifier (see opposite).

**'This is a processor that will please at every level and with every genre – its sonic scale is huge'**

The remote control is a proper beast. It's hewn from extruded metal and offers an array of small buttons that engage with the sort of clunk that German car engineers use for doors. It's logically laid out, buttons come to thumb with ease and it feels great in the hand – as long as you don't have to hold it for too long, as it's rather heavy. To fit batteries you have to dismantle it, removing four Torx bolts with the



The remote is heavy and well laid out, but doesn't offer a backlight





tool provided. A run-of-the-mill plastic remote this is not, but on the downside there is no backlight, which I think is really rather essential for home cinema use. There's no alternative control App as yet, either. As Krell offers a remote App for the matching Connect music player, it can only be a matter of time.

Getting set up was the cue for frustration. The two-line display makes navigating the menus a real challenge at first and my opening gambit of checking for the latest firmware threw up a load of messages in a language that only Krell's technical department must understand. The supplied setup mic is a rather uninspiring plastic affair and engaging the auto setup and Krell's Automatic Room Equalization System (ARES) is two separate routines.

Knowing my power amplifier, speaker and subwoofer setup intimately, I know the exact distances, delays and level trims required. Or so I thought. The Krell's single sweep ear-marked all four rear channels a smidgeon too low for my tastes and the subs had to be boosted with their own volume controls to be detected by the setup mic. It then set them about 10dB too hot. Whether this was a room anomaly or Krell's covert application of a THX-like cinema balance is unclear, but some of this bass overkill was in fact due to the crossover settings.

Quite why I thought my centre channel speaker, which is the size of a small car and has three 6in drivers, has no usable output below 140Hz remains a mystery. Likewise, the rear speakers – massive, ported floorstanders with 10in drivers – were crossed over at 80Hz when I know they are flat to 40Hz. These settings put a huge amount of LF information through the subwoofers and the overall balance was off.

A second run with the mic in a different position produced far more favourable results but I couldn't help feeling I could do better. I duly ditched the processor's suggested parameters, adjusted every setting by knowledge, ear and dB meter, and kicked back for a night at the movies. That is actually remarkably easy to do because, once setup, the Foundation processor is simplicity itself to use, with automatic operations such as the intelligent input switching and auto format decoding never missing a cue.

### Utterly immersive

The Krell Foundation unleashed a cinematic aural tsunami with the first movie I fed it. Only one processor has recently come close to its sumptuously detailed and robust presentation, and that is the considerably more affluent Anthem Statement D2V. Its sonic scale is huge, the feel is utterly immersive and the sound is completely free from strain. This is a processor that will please at every level, with every genre



## S-1500 power amp – Krell's partner in AV crime

We first reviewed the S-1500 in 2010, enjoying its 7 x 150W power output and sumptuously smooth and detailed sound quality – traits it shares with the new Foundation processor. As an ideal partner for the new kid on the block, it accepts balanced XLR inputs as well as phonos and can be powered up automatically using one of the Foundation's 12V triggers. Under the hood is a huge linear power supply with quick-charging capacitors and high-current surface-mount technology throughout. The design is a mix of amplifier technologies, with Class A circuitry deployed across the input stages and high-current Class A/B for power delivery. And don't worry about the Foundation's black and silver cosmetic execution, as the S-1500 is now available in matching black livery.

Back in the day we were also taken with the instruction manual, which quoted the S-1500's maximum heat output at 1,900 BTU/hr. Green-minded AV fans should look elsewhere!



The slim-line Foundation features a distinctive black-and-silver fascia

and disappear into the background whilst allowing the film's soundtrack, effects and dialogue to simply shine through. I hadn't got to the opening titles of *Cloud Atlas* before knowing in my heart that Krell had not let me down. I so want to own this processor.

Its balance is smooth as silk, with a spectacular clarity and insight throughout the midrange, and dialogue that makes my Denon AVP-A1HD sound more congested than a truffle hound with hayfever. In *Cloud Atlas*, Tom Hanks' voice is instantly recognisable through each of his characters and the emotion conveyed is truly sublime.

**'The stunning sonic performance and seamless day-to-day operation will thrill you for a lifetime'**

The image, unfettered by processing, allows your Blu-ray player to do its very best and the processor's overall sonic performance raises the bar for home cinema. While £6,500 is not cheap, the Krell is a gold-plated bargain.

Two weeks, 15 movies and copious pages of notes later I cannot find a single sonic or operational foible with Krell's 'entry-level' separate. *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey...* came across as impressively epic with an intensity that keeps you right on the edge of your seat, while a family night with *Mamma Mia* was utterly infectious, hilarious and toe-tappingly good fun. Even Pierce Brosnan's singing seemed bearable.

A mad evening with a trio of *Fast and Furious* movies proved the Krell can get loud and proud without losing its fabulous grip on the overall picture. It handles this sort of gunge-ho action with effortless ease,

delivering a blistering performance packed full of well-spaced effects and crisply articulated dialogue. Its performance is stunning in every conceivable acoustic respect, and I never thought I would say that about any AV hardware, period.

And just when you think life can't get any better in the media room, switch to music and the Krell morphs seamlessly into a high-end stereo pre-amp. The S/PDIF digital inputs will only handle up to 44kHz/16-bit signals but I can promise a significant upgrade from your current CD player unless it is of truly stellar provenance. Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* CD is delivered full of emotion and detail, with bass that digs extremely deep without ever sounding bloated. High-frequency elements, like the edges of percussion instruments and cymbals, have a tangible texture and extend way up the scale without sounding harsh or grainy. Again, it is the openness through the midband that sets the Krell apart, creating realistic music that communicates as much with the soul as it does the ears.

#### All aboard the Big Dipper

Reviewing the Krell Foundation has been a rollercoaster ride, mixing frustrating lows with truly sublime highs, and emerging as the best-sounding AV processor at the price by a game-changing margin. Okay, those with a penchant for the latest AV gadgetry, onscreen GUIs and more than seven channels are going to be left wanting – but only until they hear what the Krell can do. It is as sumptuously smooth as it is epic in scale, and its openness and insight is heavenly with movies and music alike. The cut thumb, the errant setup and confusing menus are an irrelevance because you only have to manage them once (and you're likely at this price to get a professional to do it for you). The stunning sonic performance and seamless day-to-day operation, on the other hand, with thrill you for a lifetime ■

#### SPECIFICATIONS

**DOLBY TRUEHD:** Yes. And Pro-Logic IIx  
**DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO:** Yes. And Neo:6  
**THX:** No  
**MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** No  
**MULTIROOM:** Yes. Zone 2  
**AV INPUTS:** 2 x composite; 6 x digital audio (3 x optical and 3 x coaxial)  
**HDMI:** 10 x inputs; 2 x outputs  
**COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes. 3 x inputs  
**VIDEO UPSCALING:** No. Only analogue-to-HDMI conversion  
**DIMENSIONS:** 433(w) x 427(d) x 88(h)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 8.1kg  
**ALSO FEATURING:** Intelligent HDMI switching; Audio Return Channel (ARC) on both HDMI outputs; Krell ARES setup and EQ; 3D passthrough; wired Ethernet; 2 x 12V triggers; balanced XLR output; stereo balanced XLR input; mini USB for non on-line firmware updates; General Admission, Front Row, On Stage, Enhanced Stereo, Orchestra, Mezzanine, Full Range + Sub, Monophonic and Party post-processing modes

#### HCC VERDICT



#### Krell Foundation

→ £6,500 Approx  
 → www.krell.com → Tel: 0208 971 3909  
 (www.absolutesounds.com)

**HIGHS:** Class-leading cinematic sound; sublime musical performance; extensive range of digital connections; gorgeous looks and brand kudos

**LOWS:** Lack of a GUI makes setup awkward; ARES didn't like my room; no 4K passthrough, upscaling or height/width processing

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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# EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT...

# 4K

It's the biggest thing in home cinema technology since high-definition, but just what is 4K and why should you even care? **Steve May** explains...

**Right. I'm hearing an awful lot about 4K, but why should I be excited?**

You know how juiced you were about the arrival of high-definition? Well, imagine that excitement magnified four-fold. 4K TVs deliver four times the picture resolution of HD, allowing you to see hitherto unparalleled detail in movies and still photography.

**I keep hearing about Ultra HD as well? Is there a difference?**

Technically, yes. The Ultra High Definition handle was coined by the US Consumer Electronics Association as a catch-all for televisions offering a minimum of 3,840 x 2,160 resolution; the idea was to help communicate the idea that the format was a step up from regular Full HD. The term has been widely adopted, but some manufacturers are reluctant to relinquish the 4K branding. In truth, 4K is rapidly becoming a bit of an umbrella term to describe a variety of different technical standards, much to the annoyance of tech pedants everywhere.

2160p UHD is a derivation of the 4K digital cinema standard, which is actually native 4,096 x 2,160 (there are other variations in the movie-making world, depending on the preferred aspect ratio of the moviemakers concerned, but let's not get bogged down in additional minutia). 4K films composed for theatrical distribution are cropped for home viewing. The film-makers aren't concerned about a few hundred missing pixels and neither should you be.

**Okay, so I want a 4K/Ultra HD TV – but these are super-expensive, right?**

Inevitably, new display technologies will always be more expensive than established products simply because they need to recoup research and development costs, plus they can't benefit from economies of scale when it comes to production. But things move fast in the world of TV tech. The

first two 4K screens launched were 84in monsters from LG and Sony. The LG 84LM960V debuted at £22,000 (but is now available for around £16,000), while Sony's KD-84X9005A sold for around £25,000. These were followed by Samsung's £35,000 S9 TV (reviewed on page 68). But these are hero products and not indicative of where 4K technology is heading. Sony's 55in KD-55X9005A and 65in KD-65X9005A (reviewed on page 44) are priced at a more approachable £4,000 and £6,000

**'It's early days yet for the 4K format, but there's little doubt that this is a game-changer when it comes to home cinema'**

respectively. As rival screens from the likes of LG, Toshiba, Philips and others roll out, those prices will erode rapidly. No one in the business expects 4K TVs to hold onto a big price premium for very long.

**What about a 4K projector? I want to go large!**

Surprisingly there's not a lot happening on the 4K front when it comes to consumer projectors. Sony broke new ground with the VPL-VW1000ES, a £16,000 quasi-pro SXRD model, and is certain to launch a cheaper update before too long. One contributory factor is the price of precision optics needed to deliver an Ultra HD image.

However, it will be some time before we see numerous mainstream 4K home cinema PJs. This is because Texas Instruments has partnered with digital cinema projector makers Barco and Christie Digital Systems to develop a 4K DLP solution, and as part of that deal has signed a non-compete clause which

Forthcoming UHD screens, such as Toshiba's 65in 65L9363 model, will help drive down prices





**4K: the pixel facts**

This diagram illustrates the different resolutions of Full HD, Ultra HD and the 4K Digital Cinema Initiatives (DCI) standard. Ultra HD is the vital one, as this is being adopted by the consumer electronics industry, although it's still often referred to by manufacturers and software studios as '4K'

3,840 x 2,160 (Ultra HD) 8,294,400 pixels

1,920 x 1,080 (Full HD) 2,073,600 pixels

4,096 x 2,160 (4K DCI standard) 8,847,360 pixels

prevents it producing 4K DLP chips for home use. Alan Roser, managing director of SIM2 UK, told *HCC*: '4K is perfect for home cinema projection, but we won't really see it until 2015 when TI is in a position to ship 4K chipsets. [Then] the floodgates will open.'

**Fine, I'll look at a TV then. Are they any good?**

It's early days yet for the 4K format, but there's little doubt that this is game-changing stuff when it comes to home cinema. For aficionados seeking the highest level of clarity, 4K screens can't be beaten. With native 4K content there should be literally no difference between a 4K studio master and what you experience onscreen, which makes it the Holy Grail of home theatre. Of course, while we wait for native 4K content to arrive, the real question is just what does the screen do with Full HD material. The answer is quite a lot, as it happens. By way of example, Sony's X9 TVs do a phenomenal job with upscaling HD. The biggest beneficiary is Blu-ray. Discs mastered from a 4K source retain some high-frequency information which can be interpolated as additional detail. Furthermore, Sony's new Mastered in 4K Blu-rays offer a wider colour gamut that, when displayed on a compatible set – one of the brand's Triluminos models, for instance – delivers redder reds, bluer blues and more verdant greens.

**Will I need to update my Blu-ray player and AV receiver to ones offering 4K upscaling?**

4K TVs bought today work perfectly well with existing BD players and AV receivers. However, if you are looking to upgrade your AV receiver, shortlist models that offer 4K passthrough and upscaling. This functionality is rapidly becoming a standard option on higher-spec AVRs, such as the Onkyo TX-NR828 and TX-NR929 and the Pioneer SC-LX57, SC-LX77 and SC-LX87. Without 4K passthrough your 4K video source will not route through the receiver; you'll need to take your HDMI feed direct. The actual value of 4K upscaling in an external source component, though, remains to be seen, as all



Sony's £16,000 VPL-VW1000ES (left) is still the only 4K projector you can buy – unless you can snaffle a pro-grade model (bottom) from your local digital cinema

4K displays already incorporate advanced image processing to do the job. Common sense would suggest the electronics in a £6,000 TV will trump those in a £150 deck – and we'll be putting that to the test in a forthcoming issue.

**OK, but will I need special HDMI cables?**

No, any branded HDMI lead should work fine...

**Upscaling Blu-ray sounds interesting, but what genuine 4K content is out there?**

At present there's not too much available. If you have a high-end PC with a 4K-capable graphics card, you'll be able to watch a small selection of material from YouTube's

Sony's Mastered in 4K Blu-ray releases include *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Ghostbusters*





To streamline and futureproof your setup, your next AVR should at least be one that offers 4K passthrough, such as Pioneer's SC-LX87

dedicated 4K channel, as well as some games content. Hopefully native 4K material really isn't that far away. The Blu-ray Disc Association has a working group looking at how best to accommodate 4K within the Blu-ray specification. If and when its recommendations are accepted, you can expect a new generation of 4K-capable Blu-ray players to be launched, as well as a new catalogue of 4K Blu-ray discs.

Before 4K can be more widely assimilated, new compression technologies need to be adopted. Gaining the greatest traction is HEVC (High Efficiency Video Coding). Heralded as the long-term replacement for H.264, HEVC is powerful enough to enable 4K delivery of terrestrial TV signals and has been successfully trialled with over-the-air broadcasts in Korea and internet streaming in Japan.

Of course, HEVC isn't the only compression game in town. Both Sony and Netflix are working with Eye IO, which has its own compression solution optimised for internet applications. In the States, Sony is launching the world's first 4K movie rental service

using the codec, called Video Unlimited 4K. Twenty-four-hour 4K movie rentals are priced at \$7.99, with 4K movie downloads available for purchase at \$30. The service is only open to owners of Sony's FMP-X1 media player. It's not clear if and when this will be rolled out to the UK and Europe, but Sony has stated that at some point the new PlayStation 4 games console will provide a gateway for 4K video delivery.

### What about 4K on broadcast TV?

While early terrestrial TV trials using HEVC compression in Korea have been extremely successful, there are no concrete plans for the likes of Freeview to go 4K anytime soon. Indeed, Managing Director Ilse Howling has categorically stated that the platform isn't interested, not least because it doesn't want to disenfranchise owners of existing Freeview hardware. For 4K reception a new set-top box would be required. 'It's not in our plans,' she told HCC. 'Here at Freeview, we want to just keep pace with the needs of our customers. I really don't think Freeview is about being cutting edge...'

The situation with satellite TV is somewhat different. It's extremely likely that Sky will debut 4K subscription channels at some point. The broadcaster has been trialling live sports coverage and would clearly have no problem sourcing 4K movie content, given its existing licensing arrangements with Hollywood. All it actually needs is a sizeable population of 4K screens and the silicon to implement a new 4K-ready Sky+HD set-top box. Expect to hear a lot more about this come 2015... ➤



'The Blu-ray Disc Association is currently looking at how to accommodate 4K within the BD specification'



Sony says the PlayStation 4 should eventually provide a gateway to 4K movie delivery



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[www.customised.uk.com](http://www.customised.uk.com)



### Do I need a super-large TV screen to get 4K, or will it be available in regular screen sizes?

It's not true that you need a huge screen to appreciate 4K resolution. Panasonic has shown off a stunning 3,840 x 2,160 pixel 20in tablet, but it's admittedly designed for specialist applications such as design and photography. In the living room, 55in is generally seen as the starting point for 4K viewing, with 65in to 85in providing the sweet spot.

### I doubt I could accommodate such a screen in my house. My living room isn't big enough...

The cool thing about 4K screens is that you don't need a large room. As President of Sony Pictures Technology, Chris Cookson explains: 'New largescreen 4K TVs are not meant to be viewed from further away. If you have a 50in TV now, you would take that out, put a bigger 4K one in and not move your chair.' It's all about filling up your field of vision with more information – and your eye is capable of perceiving that information when you're that close. A good viewing distance for 4K is 1.5x screen height. 4K effectively rebalances the relationship between the eye of the viewer and the picture on the screen, says Cookson. Cinemas were once shoebox-shaped and patrons sat typically 3-5 screen heights away, he says, 'because that's where the image was the most comfortable.' Today's cinemas are wider and movie-goers sit 1.5 screen heights back, as there's far more information on the screen and viewers can sit closer comfortably.'

### Given that 4K standards are still evolving, how futureproof is a 4K TV bought today?

The biggest change on the horizon is the introduction of HDMI 2.0 at some point in the next 18 months. This is expected to increase the potential bandwidth of 4K from today's 30Hz limit to 60Hz. While this is unlikely to affect 4K Blu-rays



Large 4K screens don't need bigger living rooms, says Sony Pictures' Chris Cookson

(with the isolated exception of a few *Hobbit* high frame-rate movie releases), it could impact broadcast 4K if 50/60Hz is adopted as a TV standard. Both Sony and LG have hinted that firmware upgrades could be utilised to maintain compatibility, although until the specification is finalised it's difficult to predict what will happen.

### Be honest now, is this technology really going to take off? In the past I've bought a Betamax deck, an HD DVD player and an 11in OLED TV...

Talk to content providers and they'll tell you 4K has already taken off. John Anderson, head of home entertainment for Sony Europe says there's no way 4K will become a 3D-style fad. 'You only have to look at just how many of this year's Oscar winners were 4K productions to realise that,' he told us. And his colleague Chris Cookson describes the development of 4K as 'part of a process that's been going on since the invention of television.' With 4K digital projection fast becoming the standard for cinema presentation, it was inevitable TV would catch up, he says.

In fact, Sony is no longer shooting any new TV pilots in HD; the studio has a mandatory policy to film them all in 4K. 'We want to make sure that what we put into the vaults today, you'll be able to watch in 4K resolution ten years from now.' Cookson adds that shows shot today have an extended colour range and better dynamics than anything shot in HD: 'It's important that the things we produce today can stand up in the market 15-20 years from now.' Hollywood has also been remastering its classic library titles at 4K resolution for years. Anderson adds: '4K is a consumer reality already, and it's well on its way to becoming the next standard.' ■

## WHAT'S AFTER 4K?

Even more pixels – what did you expect?

Even as 4K finds its ultra high-definition feet, Japanese state broadcaster NHK has been bigging up 8K, aka Super Hi-Vision. While 4K offers an image four times denser than Full HD, 8K is 16x more detailed. At 33 megapixels (or 7,680 x 4,320) it's a quantum leap over even the latest digital cinema specification. According to Dr Keiichi Kubota, NHK's Executive DG of



Engineering, the broadcaster intends to leapfrog 4K altogether and go straight to 8K. 'Some broadcasters might use 4K for their business,' he says, 'but NHK has no plans to adopt it. Instead we will move directly to an 8K system.' Trial broadcasting is expected to begin as early as 2016. NHK reasons that progress has been so rapid for 8K that 4K is increasingly looking like an interim step.

However, Super Hi-Vision seems unlikely to gain much traction outside of Japan. Gargantuan screens would be required to perceive the benefits of any 8K display. According to Sky's engineering chief Chris Johns, the maximum screen size ever likely to be adopted in UK homes is 84in, and that would effectively need to be the starting point for Super Hi-Vision. However, using the system as an acquisition format does make a lot of sense, as it would effectively future-proof content right through to the Kaiju apocalypse.



An example of the changing face of cinema, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* was filmed digitally at 48fps





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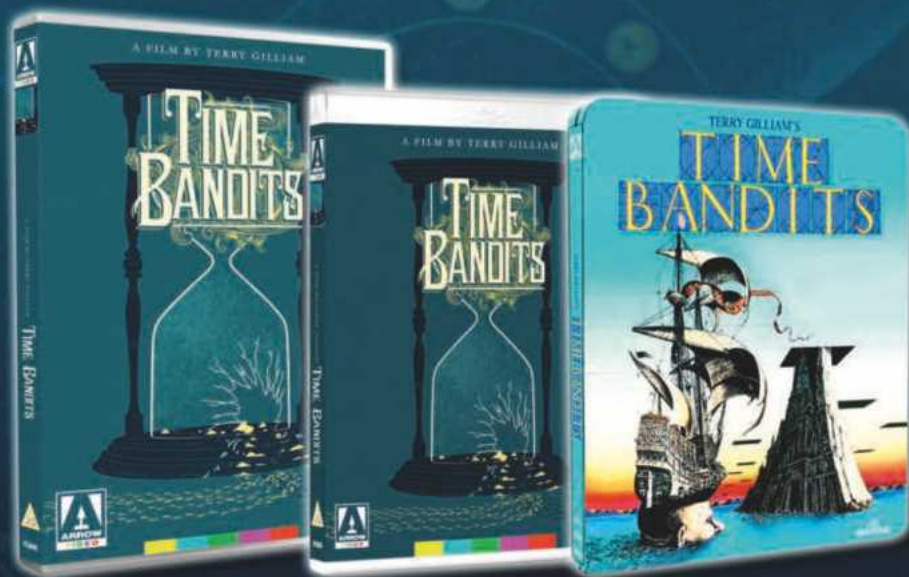
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CEDIA 2013:

# DREAM

T H E A T R E S



From smallscale movie dens to luxury screening rooms and intelligent homes, the CEDIA Awards showcase the cream of the custom installation crop. **Mark Craven** reports

**IF YOU'RE HUNTING** for inspiration for your own home cinema project, or thinking of engaging a professional outfit to work its magic in your house, then there's no better place to start than the annual CEDIA Awards. Each year, they highlight the very best custom installations from the UK, Europe and beyond, covering everything from affordable media rooms and dedicated cinemas to whole-house makeovers, eco projects and even the crazy world of hi-tech yachts.

The entries are divided into categories depending on their price range and type, before being meticulously documented and judged by a panel including HCC's very own CI fanatic Steve May. Over the following pages, we've highlighted the winners, and those scooping 'Highly Commended' awards, in our favourite categories – media rooms, home cinemas and integrated homes – plus some of the finalists that may have just missed out on a gong, but are still highly impressive. Enjoy!

Lifestyle Technologies designed this high-end home cinema for a James Bond fanatic





### Best Home Cinema: £40,000-£100,000

Winner: **Lifestyle Technologies**

Owned by a film fanatic with a passion for all things James Bond (hence the poster art on the walls), this room uses a 133in Da-Lite projector screen with automated masking in conjunction with a JVC PJ and Monitor Audio speaker array. Content comes from an Apple TV, Sky+HD and 10TB Mozaex movie server. Three rows of Cineak seating provide comfortable viewing for the owner's fellow agents.

[www.lifestyle-technologies.com](http://www.lifestyle-technologies.com)



### Best Home Cinema: £40,000-£100,000

Finalist: **The Majik House**

Formerly an empty basement, this room now caters for both movie nights and gaming sessions – the latter made all the more fun by the inclusion of a bespoke Vision Racer simulation seat.

[www.majikhouse.com](http://www.majikhouse.com)



## 34 DREAM THEATRES

### Best Home Cinema: £40,000-£100,000

Finalist: **Sensory International**

This lavish-looking dedicated room was already used for AV purposes, but the owner wanted a professional makeover. The end result included replacing a legacy touchpad controller with an iPad that the whole family could get to grips with, and mounting a 110in fixed-frame projector screen, plus subwoofers and speakers, on the main wall. Visuals are delivered via a SIM2 3D model.

[www.sensoryinternational.com](http://www.sensoryinternational.com)



### Best Home Cinema: Over £100,000

Highly Commended:

**The Big Picture**

This ultra-swish movie den (we just love the integrated lighting...) features stud walls, bespoke acoustic panels and stretch fabrics to get the best possible sound from its hidden Pro Audio Technology speaker array. High-end bigscreen images come courtesy of an M-Vision Cine 3D projector and iMasque 2.35:1 screen.

[www.getthebigpicture.co.uk](http://www.getthebigpicture.co.uk)



### Best Home Cinema: Over £100,000

Joint Winner:

**De Opera Domotica**

A state-of-the-art cinema room with a 4.5m curved projection screen, this joint winner of CEDIA's flagship category offers premium-grade 3D via a Digital Projection Titan projector and heavy-hitting sonics from Wisdom Audio loudspeakers, amps and processors. Crestron controllers simplify the user experience, and there's even a PlayStation 3 on hand for super-sized gaming.

[www.deoperadomotica.nl](http://www.deoperadomotica.nl)







### Best Home Cinema: Over £100,000

#### Joint Winner: Imagine This

A private 'screening room' in a purpose-built space, and designed to offer an opulent, luxury experience to its guests, this cinema incorporates a dizzying array of pro-level AV (including a frankly massive 6.8m screen), plus bespoke furnishings, and was calibrated to THX, ISF and HAA (Home Acoustics Alliance) standards. System control features a tailor-made GUI using visual elements from the room design. We believe 'Over £100,000' probably doesn't do it justice...  
[www.imaginethis.uk.com](http://www.imaginethis.uk.com)





## Best Home Cinema: Under £40,000

Highly Commended: **Doneo**

Turning a small room into a home cinema can pose problems – here, the main doorway was actually moved to allow space for the projector screen, source components and front L/C/R speakers. Cineak absorption and diffuser panels marshall the sound from the 7.2 Atlantic Technologies array, while an Optoma projector takes care of hi-def movies.

[www.doneo.com.mt](http://www.doneo.com.mt)



## Best Home Cinema: Under £40,000

Winner: **Finite Solutions**

A garage-cum-cinema room, this system strikes the perfect balance between audio-visual pomp and the owner's modest budget. Hardware includes a Denon AVR, JVC projector and Bowers & Wilkins speakers; acoustic treatments are mounted onto the custom-built softwood/plyboard false walls. LED lighting and Rako controllers provide scene-specific illumination to suit the owner's mood. No room for the car? Who cares...

[www.finitesolutions.co.uk](http://www.finitesolutions.co.uk)

## Best Media Room: Under £15,000

Winner: **ET Home Cinema**

A great example of how an AV system can be installed without too much impact on a room's usual function – in this case the owner's home office. With an Optoma projector on a drop-down lift, a Draper screen that descends from a ceiling recess and in-ceiling Monitor Audio speakers, only a few stabs on the Control4 interface on an iPad are required to go from paperwork to movie-viewing.

<http://ethomecinema.co.uk/>



## Best Dressed Rack

Winner: **T&T Automation**

A basement hub for a tech-heavy mansion house in Essex, this four-rack setup covers everything from AV distribution to power management and CCTV, with precision wiring and even a flood sensor for added protection. 'As close to perfect as possible,' was the verdict.

[www.tandt-automation.com](http://www.tandt-automation.com)



Highly Commended: **The Big Picture**  
Aesthetics are key when a rack is located in

full view – this features custom mounts and colour matching to the rest of the décor. Cabling is cut to length; internal lighting aids maintenance in the dark...  
[www.getthebigpicture.co.uk](http://www.getthebigpicture.co.uk)



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## 38 DREAM THEATRES

### Best Media Room: Under £15,000

Finalist: **Konnectiv**

Featuring a 70in Sharp LED TV mounted on a swivelling, motorised Future Automation bracket, this modern-feeling den provides bigscreen thrills with the minimum of fuss – and the kit rack is squirrelled away in an adjoining room. Speakers are a mix of Artcoustic on-walls and Current Audio in-ceiling models.

[www.konnectiv.com](http://www.konnectiv.com)



### Best Media Room: Under £15,000

Finalist: **Inspired Dwellings**

This sumptuous media room was completed as part of a project converting two apartments into a single family home. Movie and film content is viewed on the wall-mounted 55in Samsung LED TV, with sonics aided by a Monitor Audio R One HD soundbar. Subtle lighting and the lush-looking décor provide the finishing touches.

[www.inspireddwellings.com](http://www.inspireddwellings.com)



### Best Media Room: Under £15,000

Highly Commended: **Sound Environment**

Part home cinema, part DJ 'booth', this room caters for the needs of a whole household. Again, a 55in Samsung Smart TV is the focal point – and is regularly employed for internet browsing, apparently – with Polk speakers and B&W subwoofers providing multichannel mayhem. All cabling is installed out of sight, and the amps/source components mounted in a bespoke cabinet.

[www.soundenvironment.co.uk](http://www.soundenvironment.co.uk)





**Best Media Room:  
Over £15,000**

Finalist: **Olive AV**

Another dual-function room – the owner demanded an intimate projector-based cinema and a space for throwing parties. A Crestron system provides control of the AV kit, lighting and blackout blinds so the right mood can be found for any occasion. Custom-finished Meyer Sound speakers blend into the décor; a JVC 3D model handles projection. [www.olive-av.co.uk](http://www.olive-av.co.uk)



**Best Media Room:  
Over £15,000**

Winner: **Synergy Technologies**

Here, the installers were asked to deliver a high-performance AV system that remained 'invisible' when not in use, as the room doubles as an open-plan living space. Achieving that aim involved the fitting of a motorised projector and screen and speakers housed in the front cabinet and ceiling. The granite floors and oodles of glass necessitated discreet acoustic treatments, including special dual-lined drapes. <http://synergysav.com>



**Best Marine Installation**

Winner: **Dawsons Group**

There's no point taking to the high seas in a glamorous super-yacht and making do with tinny audio – that's why each of the cabins onboard this 40m triple-deck craft is fitted with either a 2.1 or 5.1 system, using Denon AVRs, Linn in-ceiling speakers and Velodyne MicroVee subs, and controlled by an iPod touch. Kaleidescape zone players shunt movies around the yacht from a central server.

[www.dawsonsgroup.com](http://www.dawsonsgroup.com)

## 40 DREAM THEATRES

### Best Integrated Home: £30,000-£100,000

Winner: **Complete Home Control**

A whole-house project that required blending a new extension with an existing system in the rest of the property, this multiroom setup simply oozes cutting-edge tech, from the miles of CAT6 cabling ushering Sky+HD, Blu-ray and Apple TV to each TV or the multitude of audio zones that cover both inside and outside. [www.completehomecontrol.co.uk](http://www.completehomecontrol.co.uk)



### Best Integrated Home: £100,000-£250,000

Winner: **Grahams Hi-Fi**

This fullscale makeover takes home automation to a personal level – tricks include remote-activated towel rails and security alerts if the owner's teenage son leaves an external door open. Control4 processing runs the show; numerous 7in touchscreen monitors enable simplified handling of AV, lighting, CCTV, heating, door entry and motorised garden awning. There's even a 'his n' hers' integrated music system. [www.grahams.co.uk](http://www.grahams.co.uk)



### Best Integrated Home: Over £250,000

Winner: **De Opera Domotica**

The kitlist for this installation, which snaffled the premium integrated home award, would fill an entire magazine on its own. There are, for instance, no fewer than 32in TVs dotted throughout the property, joined by AV hardware from the likes of Wisdom Audio, Velodyne, Tannoy, Bowers & Wilkins, Humax and Integra. Perhaps the ultimate party piece (beyond the underwater speakers in the swimming pool) is a carbon monoxide sensor in the entertainment area that ensures guests never run out of fresh air. [www.deoperadomotica.nl](http://www.deoperadomotica.nl)

## WELL DONE!

*CEDIA 2013: The Winners and Highly Commended*

### Best Media Room: Under £15,000

Winner: ET Home Cinema  
Highly Commended: Sound Environment

### Best Media Room: Over £15,000

Winner: Synergy Technologies

### Best Home Cinema: Under £40,000

Winner: Finite Solutions  
Highly Commended: Doneo

### Best Home Cinema: £40,000-£100,000

Winner: Lifestyle Technologies  
Highly Commended: T&T Automation

### Best Home Cinema: Over £100,000

Joint Winner: Imagine This  
Joint Winner: De Opera Domotica  
Highly Commended: The Big Picture

### Best Integrated Home: Under £30,000

Winner: Lewis Building Technology

### Best Integrated Home: £30,000-£100,000

Winner: Complete Home Control  
Highly Commended: Konnectiv

### Best Integrated Home: £100,000-£250,000

Winner: Grahams Hi-Fi  
Highly Commended: Henri Integreuteur Domotique

### Best Integrated Home: Over £250,000

Winner: De Opera Domotica  
Highly Commended: Sensory International  
Highly Commended: SMC

### Best Marine Installation:

Winner: Dawsons Group

### Best Dressed Rack

Winner: T&T Automation  
Highly Commended: The Big Picture

### Best Innovative Solution (Residential)

Winner: Dawsons Group

### Best Showroom

Winner: Finite Solutions  
Highly Commended: Pulse Marketing  
Highly Commended: Projecting & Sound Art



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→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** WHARFEDALE Mid-range 5.1 speaker system **LOEWE** 55in 'Slim Frame' LED TV and wireless surround system **SAMSUNG** Reference-grade 85in Ultra HD TV and £250 BD deck **WESTERN DIGITAL** Affordable media player **SYNOLOGY** NAS device with app support **PARROT** Bluetooth headphones **ROUNDUP** Five 55in flagship TVs go head-to-head **AND MORE!**

## Game-changer!



Sony's KD-65X9005A is the first screen to offer Ultra HD excitement for a sub-£10,000 price tag. Check out page 48 for more

### HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

# Wharfedale revamps the Diamond standard

Want a high-performance 5.1 array for less than £1,000? **Danny Phillips** reckons you should check out the latest iteration of Wharfedale's long-running Diamond speaker line

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
5.1-channel  
speaker package

**POSITION:**  
Successor to the  
Diamond 10;  
floorstanders are  
also available

**PEERS:**  
Acoustic Energy  
3 Series;  
Monitor Audio Mass;  
KEF E305





**IT'S 1981 AND** the dying embers of disco are still burning the nation's dancefloors, Diana Spencer is about to marry our future king, and British audio brand Wharfedale unveils its very first Diamond speaker – the progenitor of the 5.1 system you see before you.

This trip down memory lane underlines the decades of expertise behind the Diamond moniker. A best-seller in its day, the original Diamond design delivered sparkling sound quality from compact cabinets (thanks in part to their use of stiff yet light polypropylene cones) and each generation since has introduced new technology or material to the market – including 2009's Diamond

10 series and last year's excellent DX1 HCP package.

Despite Diamond's evolution over the last 32 years, its value-for-money ethos has remained constant, which brings us neatly to the Diamond 100-HCP (or Home Cinema Pack), an impressively-specced 5.1 system that comes in at just under a grand.

It comprises two pairs of the company's new Diamond 121 standmounts for the fronts and rears, the 101C centre and the SPC-10 PowerCube subwoofer. The Diamond 100 range also includes two floorstanding models, the 155 and 157, should you wish to upgrade to something with a little more oomph.

After liberating the Diamond 121s from their boxes, I couldn't help feeling a little underwhelmed by their design. The black wood finish (also available in cherry, rosewood and walnut) and unique 'Diamond pattern' rings surrounding the cloth circles look pleasant enough, but it's build quality that lets the side down.

I'm not saying they're shoddily made – the chipboard/MDF cabinets are firmly bolted together and fairly weighty – but the plasticky finish on the front panel and plinth betray their budget price tag. By contrast, rivals like Acoustic Energy's 3 Series manage to communicate a sense of luxury for a similar price.

The binding posts on the back are nice and sturdy, though, and there are two pairs should you wish to bi-wire them. If not, metal joiners bridge the posts.

Wharfedale claims that getting the best possible bass performance from small cabinets was top of its priorities when designing the Diamond 100 series, and the plinth on the bottom of the 121s plays a crucial role in its low-frequency performance. Bookshelf speakers are often limited by their relatively small ports, which make it hard for them to transfer high-pressure airflow effectively. To combat this, Wharfedale devised the Slot-Loaded Distributed Port, a feature which is derived from the Aperiodic system used by Wharfedale's high-end Jade

**'Despite the evolution of the Diamond speaker over the years, its value-for-money ethos has remained'**

series. High-pressure airflow exits through a slot between the plinth and cabinet base. This larger opening, it's claimed, allows for more efficient power transfer from port to open air, thereby reducing turbulence and acoustic phenomena like bass 'chuffing'. It also makes it easier to place the speaker close to your wall if you have to, unlike rear-ported boxes.

The two-way Diamond 121 employs a 5in woven Kevlar bass driver and a 1in soft-dome tweeter that has been redesigned to incorporate a ferrite magnet system (as opposed to less cost-effective Neodymium) and a waveguide.

The 101C centre is identically styled, save for the customary horizontal orientation and an extra bass driver to give dialogue more authority. Its bulky cabinet is wider than most Blu-ray players, though, which isn't in keeping with the more compact nature of the 121s. That could be an issue if you're planning on placing it amongst all your other AV kit. ➤



You can also spec the Diamond 100-HCP in cherry, rosewood or walnut finishes



The subwoofer completing the line-up comes from the PowerCube range. Not strictly a cube, this partners a 215W Class D amplifier with a downward-firing 10in driver, and sports the same blackwood finish and curved edges as the other speakers. It looks the part and boasts decent build quality for the money. Isolation spikes are supplied in the box.

### A sound to savour

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the Diamond 100-HCP is absolutely delicious.

What makes it so tasty is the speakers' naturally rich and powerful bass output, courtesy of that Slot-Loaded Distributed Port. Low frequencies are tight and controlled, thumping right into your chest with no flab or colouration from the cabinets. You could quite happily listen to these *sans* sub and still enjoy a satisfying level of depth, which is almost unheard of at this price – great news for two-channel music listening as well as movies.

With the Stone Giants scene in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* on Blu-ray, the sense of scale achieved by these unassuming speakers is remarkable. The giants slam boulders into each other with a massive, rumbling boom, while the cracks of splitting stones are delivered with no trace of harshness.

The SPC-10 subwoofer reinforces the speakers' bass notes brilliantly, fusing seamlessly without overpowering them. It's agile, too, handling the score's fast-paced kettle drums without overhang.

Nor is this array all about power – it demonstrates a great deal of finesse, too. In Peter Jackson's flick, the soundstage positively twinkles with light, airy high-frequency information, from the rustle of dwarfish feet

**All the speakers are equipped with dual binding posts to enable bi-amping**

on woodland floors to the background murmur of Middle Earth wildlife. Meanwhile, the score's sweeping strings have a wonderfully rich and velvety quality.

The Diamond 100-HCP's intricate, richly textured sound stays smooth and unhurried even when you crank up the volume. Crucial dialogue is articulated in a clear, commanding manner by the 101C centre speaker, picking out Gandalf's gruff vocal nuances and lending depth to Azog's barked orders.

The thrilling action all takes place within an expansive soundstage, into which effects are fired with energy and accuracy. Tonally, the speakers are voice matched, which means that surround information blends well with the fronts and centre when sonics are steered between channels.

### A real revelation

So as budget speaker systems go, the Diamond 100-HCP is a real revelation, offering sound quality better than its price tag suggests. Bass performance is the highlight thanks to some clever port technology, but the sound is also beautifully detailed, clean and authoritative.

The only real negative is the build quality, particularly the plasticky front panel finish and the rather pedestrian look. And the cabinets themselves, especially the centre speaker, are bigger than some may feel comfortable with. But that aside, the Diamond 100-HCP is one of the best budget speaker packages on the market, and well worth a grand of anyone's cash ■

## SPECIFICATIONS

### DIAMOND 121

**DRIVE UNITS:** 5in woven Kevlar bass driver; 1in soft-dome tweeter  
**ENCLOSURE:** Ported via Slot-Loaded Distributed Port  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 50Hz-20kHz  
**SENSITIVITY:** 86dB  
**POWER HANDLING:** 25-100W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 174(w) x 315(h) x 255(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 5.3kg

### DIAMOND 101C CENTRE

**DRIVE UNITS:** 2 x 5in woven Kevlar bass drivers; 1in soft-dome tweeter  
**ENCLOSURE:** Ported via Slot-Loaded Distributed Port  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 60Hz-20kHz  
**SENSITIVITY:** 89dB  
**POWER HANDLING:** 25-150W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 470(w) x 174(h) x 264(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 8.2kg

### SPC-10 POWERCUBE

**DRIVE UNITS:** 10in long-throw cone driver  
**ENCLOSURE:** Sealed  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 35Hz-120Hz  
**ON BOARD POWER:** 215W  
**REMOTE CONTROL:** No  
**DIMENSIONS:** 352(w) x 382(h) x 305(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 11.4kg  
**CONNECTIONS:** Stereo line in; mono (LFE) line in; stereo speaker level input

## HCC VERDICT



### Wharfedale Diamond 100-HCP

→ £950 Approx → [www.wharfedale.co.uk](http://www.wharfedale.co.uk)  
 → Tel: 01480 452561

**HIGHS:** Highly detailed sound; tight, potent bass reproduction; excellent value for money

**LOWS:** Plasticky finish and rather pedestrian looks; larger cabinets than rival sub/sat systems

**Performance** ★★★★★

**Design** ★★★★★

**Features** ★★★★★

**Overall** ★★★★★





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# The resolution revolution

Sony's latest TV brings Ultra HD to the masses – well, nearly...

**John Archer** explores this year's hottest TV ticket

**I'VE HEARD** A startling amount of rubbish spouted about 4K/Ultra HD TVs in recent months. 'Nobody cares about more pixels'. 'The human eye can't perceive the difference between normal HD and 4K resolutions'. 'Forget UHD – what we need is OLED'. '4K is just another marketing tool for selling more TVs'. 'Native sources won't be available for at least five years'. And so on.

Today, though, I can refute pretty much all of this nonsense more directly than ever. Sat on my test bench is Sony's KD-65X9005A: a 3,840 x 2,160 resolution TV that's isn't insanely/unmanageably large, isn't insanely/unaffordably expensive, and yet which still reveals its 4K picture quality to be a jaw-dropping, irresistible class apart from even the finest Full HD images.

The 65X9005A is a 65in TV. This makes it nearly 20in smaller than any other Ultra HD TV we've tested, and so vastly more living room-friendly. This more domesticated approach is underlined, moreover, by the 65X9005A's sensational design, which combines a premium black finish with elongated wings containing six sizable speakers sculpted into the TV's glass surface.

The 65X9005A's £6,000 price, meanwhile, makes it £14,000 cheaper than any previous 4K beast. £6,000 is still a wedge of cash – almost double the price of Panasonic's TX-P65VT65 Full HD plasma TV. But then Sony's screen offers four times the native resolution of the Panasonic, so maybe just costing double isn't that bad...

Connectivity is mostly strong, with its highlights of

four HDMI's, three USB's, built-in Wi-Fi, and even screen-sharing support with NFC devices simply by touching those devices to the TV's second handset. The only fly – or potential fly – in the ointment is the use of v1.4 HDMI's rather than the yet-to-be-ratified v2.0 standard that will be necessary to deliver 4K images at higher frame rates than 30fps.

Is this a major problem? That's impossible to call right now. Certainly, 4K movie formats when they appear will likely predominantly use 24p frame rates compatible with HDMI v1.4, and even if future broadcasts use a higher frame rate, 4K broadcast receivers could carry a 30fps output option.

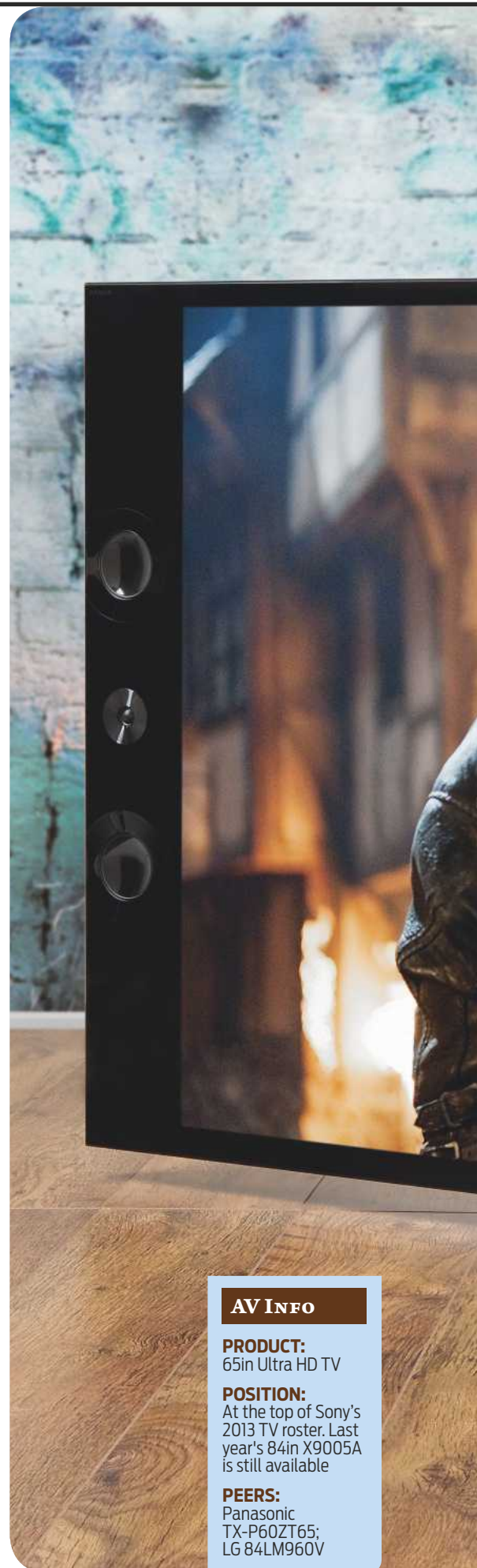
And anyway, Ultra HD is not the Sony's only attraction. It also sports a full suite of the brand's top-level picture calibration tools,

expansive multimedia file playback support and access to the SEN online service.

Anyone spending £6,000 on a TV will expect some robust sonics, and the 65X9005A is up to the mark. Its integrated speaker system handled everything from the huge dynamics of *Saving Private Ryan's* opening beach assault to the subtle atmospheric of *Se7en* (and even a selection of CDs) with considerable élan. Sony has employed ferrofluid material – here dubbed Magnetic Fluid technology – to enable its drivers to operate in its slim enclosure. The result is a largescale sound.

## Back to reality

A quest for 4K-related features within the Sony's onscreen menus uncovers two key points. One is a Reality Creation section where you can adjust the resolution-enhancement and



## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
65in Ultra HD TV

**POSITION:**  
At the top of Sony's 2013 TV roster. Last year's 84in X9005A is still available

**PEERS:**  
Panasonic TX-P60ZT65;  
LG 84LM960V

Like Sony's W9 models, this 65in set ships with two handsets



Sony's 65X9005A incorporates six speakers in its gloss black bezel



**GRIMM  
GUNPLAY**  
*Hansel & Gretel...  
delivers tongue-  
in-cheek gory  
thrills, p96*







**Triluminos edge LED wizardry means the Sony can deliver the wider colour gamut of Mastered in 4K BDs**

you're watching from a perfectly normal viewing distance. You don't have to stick your nose up to the screen to marvel at its beauty.

With Ultra HD demo footage provided on a Sony media player, football clips reveal insane levels of facial detail in the watching crowds, hitherto imperceptible weaves in the players' outfits and individual blades of grass in pitches. Things get even better with scenes from Sony's *Total Recall* and *After Earth* flicks. Pretty much the only response I could muster to these trailers was to shake my head in awe and dream of the day when I might be able to watch the films in 4K all the way through. Stunning clarity is coupled with fluid motion and a spectacular colourscape courtesy of Sony's natty Triluminos technology.

An important task for the 65X9005A is to upscale Full HD and even SD sources to UHD resolution, and this also proves an area of strength. HD sources remapped to the 3,840 x 2,160 screen appear dense, detailed and mostly free of noise and processing foibles. They're no rival for a native 4K experience, of course, but Sony's silicon proves to be very adept, particularly when dealing with Blu-ray releases that have been created from 4K digital masters. In fact, Sony provided us with clips from its upcoming Mastered in 4K version of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, which also features extra colour information to support the TV's Triluminos system. It looked gorgeous.

Even SD looks credible on the 65X9005A. Not especially detailed, perhaps, but far from the horribly over-processed, ultra-noisy mess I'd secretly expected.

### Goggle-eyed entertainment

Recent research suggests that Joe Public is losing interest in 3D. A shame, as it astounds on the 65X9005A. The screen delivers the advantages of the Passive 3D format – no flicker, enhanced brightness and colours, no crosstalk – at a resolution that, while still halved vertically, is greater than Full HD. The result is brilliantly immersive pictures.

Unfortunately, the 65X9005A's black level performance isn't best-in-breed. If you're watching in a darkened room, some black picture areas tend to look slightly grey – or disconcertingly grey if you deactivate the TV's local dimming system. Set the latter to its maximum level to hugely improve black levels, and you have to factor in noticeable banding of light around bright objects. The low local dimming setting delivers the best compromise.

Thanks to this issue, the 65X9005A isn't totally perfect. However, it delivers Ultra HD images, both native and upscaled, at a price point that a year ago seemed unimaginable. Sony has delivered a TV that shouts 'next generation' with every fibre of its being ■

noise-reducing elements of the X-Reality Pro upscaling engine. The other obvious feature is the option to have the TV render any suitably high-res photographs in 4K resolution (see, there is a native source available!). And boy, do I suggest you switch this option on, as the way your digital stills look in this mode will have your mouth hanging open in awe. In fact, looking at 4K stills is a perfect way to start your

**'The greater resolution enables the Sony to deliver colour blends of real precision and accuracy'**

next-gen experience, providing as it does a straightforward way of appreciating what all those extra pixels can do.

The sheer resolution of the image is the main thing, but also apparent is how much extra depth the screen's enhanced pixel count delivers – it avoids the normal HD limitation of very distant image data being softened and blurred into flatness. Another revelation is the way colours are rendered. The greater resolution enables the screen to deliver colour blends of real precision and accuracy, and these join the enhanced depth of field to make 2D images almost feel 3D.

I should stress that these advantages are all clearly apparent, despite the Sony only being 65in rather than 84in – and even if

### ON THE MENU



→ The KD-65X9005A sports the same colourful UI found on the brand's Full HD sets. Gone is the XMB interface of previous generations, replaced with a menu structure that is more intuitive. The SEN section uses a checkerboard of large icons – VOD content is wide-ranging

### SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Passive  
**ULTRA HD:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160  
**TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD, DVB S2  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; component video; composite video; Ethernet; RF input; 3 x USB; optical digital audio output  
**SOUND:** Magnetic Fluid Speakers with 65W total output  
**BRIGHTNESS:** N/A  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** Over 1 million:1  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,682(w) x 875(h) x 58(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 45kg  
**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; Native UHD resolution; 4K X-Reality Pro upscaling; four pairs of 3D glasses included; Reality Creation processing; Live Colour processing; Triluminos backlight system; DLNA and USB media playback; Sony Entertainment Network; NFC support

### HCC VERDICT



#### Sony KD-65X9005A

→ £6,000 Approx → [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)

→ Tel: 0844 8466 555

**HIGHS:** Unbelievable Ultra HD pictures; supreme design and build; effective upscaling; astonishing sound quality

**LOWS:** Black levels could be a touch better; there are sleeker Smart interfaces around; integrated speakers make the set bigger than you might imagine

**Performance** ★★★★★

**Design** ★★★★★

**Features** ★★★★★

**Overall** ★★★★★





# invisible loudspeakers

Amina's invisible speaker technology was utilized to generate highly clarity, room filling sound in this truly exceptional integrated and visually stunning solution. Each multi-million pound apartment, situated in the heart of Mayfair in London, has five Amina Invisible Loudspeakers installed providing a hidden 5.1 surround sound system for the main living area.

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**AV INFO**

**PRODUCT:**  
55in LED TV with  
integrated surround  
sound system

**POSITION:**  
The Individual 55  
sits below the  
Reference ID

**PEERS:**  
Sony KD-  
55X9005A;  
Bang & Olufsen  
BeoVision 11

**KILLER TV!**

*Dexter: The  
Seventh Season  
arrives on BD, p103*

Buyers of the Individual 55 Slim Frame  
can choose between different trim colours



# Loewe's sonic solution

This TV/speaker solution promises to offer a sweet space rather than a sweet spot. **Adrian Justins** investigates

**TIME MAY NOT** be on the side of Full HD, with Ultra HD looming large, but as the Rolling Stones proved at Glastonbury this year, if you're good enough it doesn't matter how long you are in the tooth. And while a lifetime of hard living may not have done the Stones' blue rinse lineup any favours in terms of their appearance, Full HD images should be at their pinnacle on Loewe's Individual 55 Slim Frame LED TV thanks to some cutting-edge picture enhancement technology. And while I'm indulging in this hackneyed musical analogy, Loewe might also say that the 3D Orchestra IS speaker system, reviewed here in tandem with the Individual 55, is proof that when it comes to audio quality you can sometimes get what you want. More on that later.

The Individual 55 is a high-end screen with high-end Loewe design. Although similar to the outgoing Individual range it does feature a slimmer 1cm-wide aluminium frame (hence the Slim Frame branding), with the screen also appearing closer to the frame edge thanks to a single sheet of glass that hides the 1cm black border when in standby. New colour options are available, including a titanium finish for the frame, as well as black, silver and high-gloss white. As with the previous Individual range, magnetic strips allow the end-user a degree of customisation to match their own décor.

Customers opting for the Stereo 3D Orchestra speaker will find it fits beneath the screen and frames the large eye in the centre of the Individual's bottom edge. In the centre of the eye is an iris that glows red, green or blue according to the TV's status.

Loewe customers aren't expected to remove the socket covers from the back of the TV once their installer has done their work, but if they do they'll find most digital and analogue options, including four HDMI's. Less commonly found connections include a digital optical audio input, a bevy of speaker terminals and control sockets for the motorised stand and Orchestra speaker control box (which fits into its own slot).

Loewe says significant changes have been made to the screen's insides, with refined picture processing, intelligently controlled LED illumination, a 400Hz picture refresh rate and anti-reflective contrast filter glass. The brand also says the Individual 55 meets its own 'Image+' benchmark, as found on its Reference ID models. It also offers a built-in HDD that can be used as a PVR with its Freeview HD or satellite tuners (but there's no Freesat EPG).

The operating system has been completely redesigned over previous models, although aspects of the GUI are still rather dull and confusing, using white text on black, and sometimes simply describing a feature rather than how to change it. It's annoying, too, that the picture is blanked out when selecting the sound menu. The standout feature is definitely the home screen, where large-sized channel and app icons appear. These can be edited and re-ordered to suit your preference; I quickly had BBC iPlayer and the HD channels in the most prominent place. BBC aside, the set's Smart TV selection provides little excitement with Vimeo, Box Office 365 and the Cartoon Network providing scant reward in the absence of Netflix, LoveFilm and Blinkbox.

## Consistent performer

Most aspects of the screen's picture are consistently good with one or two quirks. Backlighting is even with minor amounts of clouding in the bottom corners and detail is generally excellent, especially with HD sources. The Individual 55 can iron out judder beautifully thanks to its DMM processor but when watching movies, such as *Silver Linings Playbook* on Blu-ray, it is best left off to avoid the inevitable artificial sheen and occasional artefact. And with 3D viewing, DMM kicks in automatically, causing my *Transformers* platter to lose its grainy patina and cinematic frame-rate until manually disabled.

Motion clarity is reasonable; fast pans of cricket pitches during the Ashes retained plenty of detail. Shadow detail is another



Each Loewe Orchestra 3D IS speaker houses a pair of 3.5in 'Flat Drive' drivers

strength, and I had no trouble distinguishing the subtleties of Batman's black outfit on the rooftops in *Batman Begins*.

### Where no system has gone before

The 3D Orchestra IS (Integrated System) takes TV sound to an unusual place. Four actively powered cylindrical satellites receive decoded signals from the TV (there's no need for a separate AVR here) and work in conjunction with the centre speaker and wireless sub to create a 5.1 system. The USP here is that these four speakers do not require precise positioning; they can be placed to fit in with the layout of your room at different heights and at different distances on either side from the screen. Two separate bi-directional speakers inside each housing emit sound upwards and downwards, while shaped cones direct sound precisely and evenly around the speakers. The idea is to create a diffuse 360° 'sweet space' rather than a sweet spot. Aiding this omnidirectional effect is the supplied triangular microphone, which measures your room's dimensions, layout and materials in order to calibrate the system.

From an installation point of view the 3D Orchestra IS brings greater flexibility than

conventional systems, especially for rooms that are employed as lounges rather than dedicated home cinemas. The speakers can also be customised visually, with a variety of different inserts available for the top of the cylinders. The package is available in 3.1 and 5.1 configurations, and additional speakers can be purchased to make a 7.1 system. Extra subwoofers can also be added (up to a maximum of four) for larger spaces.

But hang on a minute, isn't the whole point of home cinema that it discretely places effects around the room rather than produce

**'The system is meaty and powerful, with the star of the show being the rich, agile 200W subwoofer'**

a homogenous sound? Indeed, hence Loewe allows you to vary the intensity of the spatial effect within the settings menu, minimising it if desired.

Unsurprisingly, the highest setting works best with music, yet I did find it surprisingly enjoyable with movies. In *Rise of the Guardians* Dolby TrueHD soundtrack, Jack Frost's dialogue clearly emits from the centre channel, but sounds such as the jingle of the elves' bells, fairies' fluttering wings and swirling sands as Pitch circles the globe seem to emanate all around the room. It's as full and involving as Loewe claims, altering very little as I prowled around. Switching to *The Daily Politics* on TV and keeping the spatial effect on high, however, and the system sounds strangely weak and echoey. And Andrew Neill is clearly not to blame, as there is no improvement with other daytime telly, until I set the spatial effect to its lowest position and selected mono rather than stereo or surround.

Overall the system is meaty and powerful, with the star of the show probably being the dinky, 200W subwoofer, which trades absolute low-end extension for a rich tone and considerable agility. The performance of the sultry-looking Orchestra IS cabinets, meanwhile, is clean and delicate. Yet the spatial effect is clearly better suited to certain material than others and accessing the menu to change it when things sound wrong is not a quick and easy process. A similar criticism extends to the Individual 55 screen, which can deliver knockout pictures but shares a similarly convoluted interface system.

So, as someone once sang, you can't always get what you want. Although for those who want a living room system with premium looks, customisation options and an immersive sound experience, this could fit the bill ■

### SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active  
**ULTRA HD:** No. 1,920 x 1,080  
**TUNER:** Freeview HD x 2; satellite x 2  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; RS232C; minijack analogue audio out; centre speaker in; Digital Audio Link interface; optical digital audio out; optical digital audio in; Ethernet; 3 x USB  
**SOUND:** 2 x 20W  
**BRIGHTNESS:** 400 cd/m<sup>2</sup>  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** 5,000,000:1  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1326(w) x 804(h) x 60(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 36.8kg  
**FEATURES:** Edge LED backlighting with auto dimming; 400Hz refresh rate; DMM picture processor; Image+ Active contrast enhancer; Multichannel decoder (Dolby Digital, DTS, PCM); Dolby Virtual Speaker; Dolby Pro-Logic; MediaHome playback from home network and USB; 500GB DR+ PVR; MediaNet (browser/internet radio/internet video with 79 apps)

### LOEWE STEREOSPEAKER 55

**DRIVE UNITS:** 8 x 2in full-range drivers  
**ENCLOSURE:** Ported  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 90Hz-18kHz  
**SENSITIVITY:** n/a **POWER HANDLING:** 80W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 1,326(w) x 63(h) x 17(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 0.7kg

### LOEWE 3D ORCHESTRA SPEAKER

**DRIVE UNITS:** 2 x 3.5in Flat Drive Speakers  
**ENCLOSURE:** Enclosed  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 200Hz-22kHz  
**SENSITIVITY:** 102dB @ 1m  
**POWER HANDLING:** 40W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 10.5(w) x 31(h) x 10.5(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 0.7kg

### LOEWE 3D ORCHESTRA SUBWOOFER

**DRIVE UNITS:** 6in paper cone  
**ENCLOSURE:** Ported  
**FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 45Hz-300Hz  
**ON BOARD POWER:** 200W  
**DIMENSIONS:** 240(w) x 245(h) x 261(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 5.2kg  
**CONNECTIONS:** Phono

### HCC VERDICT



### Loewe Individual 55 Slim Frame & 3D Orchestra IS

→ £7,000 Approx → [www.loewe.tv](http://www.loewe.tv)  
 → Tel: 020 7937 7007

**HIGHS:** Picture performance; powerful, rich sound; high-end design; speaker placement flexibility  
**LOWS:** Hit and miss nature of spatial sound; convoluted menus; dull looking GUI

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★





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# Flagship fight club

The 55in screen size is where the big brands strut their stuff, offering premium designs and state-of-the-art processing and features. **John Archer** puts five such models to the test

## **LG 55LA860W, £2,000**

An ultra-thin bezel and Magic Remote help the LG stand out

## **PANASONIC TX-L55WT65, £2,500**

Can Panasonic's flagship LED match the quality of its plasmas?

## **PHILIPS 55PFL8008, £2,500**

An Active 3D display with the brand's unique Ambilight system

## **SONY KDL-55W905A, £2,300**

Triluminos LED technology should ensure vibrant colours

## **SAMSUNG UE55F8000, £2,500**

The most potent non-4K TV from the market leader



# Looking on the bright side

LG's gorgeous-looking TV comes close to greatness, but suffers in regards to contrast



**LG TVs CERTAINLY** know how to make an entrance. The 55LA860W – one of LG's most high-end 2013 sets – is a serious looker, thanks to a bezel so thin you don't even notice it for most of the time; the beautiful finish applied to the bezel's sides; and a striking metallic, open-frame desktop pedestal. The glamour even extends to the Magic Remote handset you get with the TV, as its small, strikingly conical form comes clad in a bold, shiny silver.

This remote doesn't just look good either. It also proves an inspired way of navigating LG's neat-looking Smart Hub onscreen menu system. All you have to do is point the remote at a menu item and hit the select button; a Nintendo Wii-like 'point and click' approach so intuitive I can't understand why more TV brands aren't using it.

Looking further at LG's Smart TV interface and features, there's much to like. Organising the different apps and online service options into simple onscreen folders will feel pleasingly familiar to anyone used to dealing with computers, and the number of direct content/app links LG has fitted onscreen without making the menus look cluttered is excellent.

I was reasonably impressed by the amount of video content carried by LG's online system, which includes BBC iPlayer, LoveFilm and Netflix content, along with lots of 3D material. That said, Samsung and Sony both go further with their online video choice.

The 55LA860W rivals anyone, though, with the amount of video, photo and music files it can play from USB sticks or networked DLNA

devices. Add in the pop-up camera integrated into the TV's svelte form, so you can make Skype calls or control the TV by gestures, and you have a convincing Smart TV – although I found the Magic Remote much preferable to waving my hands around like a fool.

LG's long relationship with independent calibration group the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF) continues here. So, as well as a huge array of picture calibration tools you get two ISF picture preset slots where ISF engineers can store the best day and night picture settings for your room. If you pay them to do the calibration, of course.

## Scared of the dark

So far the 55LA860W hasn't put a foot wrong, but cueing up some dark content (the final Two-Face sequence in *The Dark Knight* on Blu-ray) quickly reveals the difficulties it has delivering a decent contrast performance. Using the TV's local dimming option finds many bright objects against dark backdrops surround by distracting blocks of light that run the full height of the picture. There's also a notable shortage of shadow detail in dark areas. Turn the local dimming off, though, and blacks become an unnatural milky grey.

The 55LA860W's pictures improve with bright, colourful content. The *Everything I Need* song sequence in *The Muppets* looks beautifully vibrant, extremely sharp (even though this isn't a particularly crisp Blu-ray), and surprisingly subtly coloured, giving it the cinematic feel missing during dark scenes.

The lantern release sequence in Chapter 8 of *Tangled* in 3D, meanwhile, reveals a really fun, well-defined and crosstalk-free 3D experience, despite some Passive tech-induced jaggedness around bright edges.

The set's audio is above average, thanks to the scale of the soundstage, the engrossing detail present in the mix, and a reasonable amount of bass. However, if a film soundtrack really goes deep or you push the volume too high, the LF performance starts to distort.

While it has its good points, my opinion of the 55LA860W is ultimately defined by its significant problems handling dark scenes – especially when considered against some of the other, much more contrast-rich TVs in this group test. It does undercut the others price-wise, though.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes, Passive  
**ULTRA HD:** No, 1,920 x 1,080  
**TUNER:** Yes, Freeview HD and Freesat HD  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF inputs  
**SOUND:** 24W  
**BRIGHTNESS:** N/A  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** N/A  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,229(w) x 721(h) x 35.1(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 23.4kg  
**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi, local dimming system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; LG Smart TV online platform with multiple video streaming services; Magic Remote



# A sense of Déjà vu

This flagship Panasonic LED shares some of the same backlight niggles as its LG rival



**EVEN BY THE** standards of a group that is full of unfeasibly attractive TVs, the L55WT65 is outstandingly pretty. Everything about it, from its slim frame to its metallic finish, glass-edge trim and imaginative metal-edged glass table-top stand, is designed to seduce.

The L55WT65's up-front appeal continues, moreover, when you switch it on and find yourself greeted by an exceptionally helpful onscreen guide – including spoken-word tutorials – and then presented with Panasonic's friendly My Home Screen Smart TV interface, complete with multiple themed preset content 'hub' screens and the facility to set up personalised hubs for different members of your household. Excellent.

Also excellent are some aspects of the L55WT65's connections. Three USBs, an SD card slot and onboard Wi-Fi-delivered DLNA provide ample options for playback of your multimedia files, plus you can share content on Android or iOS devices via Panasonic's Viera Remote 2 app. The set even manages to build a pop-up camera for Skyping and face recognition features into its slim form.

The L55WT65 only provides three HDMI, however, and Panasonic's Viera Connect online platform isn't as packed with video content as other Smart platforms. The only ones of real note are the inevitable BBC iPlayer and Netflix.

As befits its position as Panasonic's premium 55in TV, its picture engine is pretty uncompromising, including 16-segment local dimming control over its edge-LED lighting system; a mind-boggling '3,600Hz' motion

processing system; enough calibration tools (including white balance fine-tuning and colour management) to secure the endorsement of the Imaging Science Foundation; and Passive 3D playback.

## An illuminating problem

Despite its potent spec and gorgeous front-end the L55WT65 comes up a little short with its pictures. And, like its LG rival, it's contrast that lets the side down.

In *The Dark Knight*, the sequence where Batman tries to stop The Joker from kidnapping Harvey Dent from a police van looks rather grey and short of shadow detail and depth if you don't use the set's local dimming. But if you do call in local dimming, even the relatively high number of individual zones can't prevent irritating light blocking around any bright objects that appear against dark backdrops.

The L55WT65 delivers some terrific picture qualities in other areas. Images are immaculately sharp, for instance, combining great detail resolution with some of the cleanest motion handling in the LED world.

The set also exhibits a deft touch when it comes to upscaling standard-definition material, adding sharpness while stripping out source noise. This is a sure-fire sign of the qualities of the processing engine lurking within Panasonic's range-topping set.

Colours are intense but also subtle and natural (aside from the occasional 'slipped' tone during dark scenes), and the set supports

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Passive

**ULTRA HD:** No. 1,920 x 1,080

**TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD and Freesat HD

**CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF inputs; SD card slot

**SOUND:** 18W

**BRIGHTNESS:** N/A

**CONTRAST RATIO:** N/A

**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,227(w) x 717(h) x 32(d)mm

**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 16kg

**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; 16-segment local dimming system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; Viera Connect Smart TV online platform with multiple video streaming services; My Home Screen interface; four pairs of 3D glasses included; touchpad remote included; 3,600Hz motion processing

a slightly wider viewing angle than most LED TVs you'll come across.

3D Blu-rays prove extremely watchable – bright, colourful, full of depth, and generally unhindered by ghosting provided you keep your vertical viewing angle under 15 degrees. Audio performance is equally solid. There's plenty of detail delivered here, and you can hit potent volume levels without the speakers distorting. Bass is a little weak, though.

Panasonic has worked wonders with its TV designs and Smart TV interface this year, and its LED pictures show signs of improvement. However, as with the LG set, some obvious contrast problems make it hard to give the L55WT65 an unreserved recommendation. ➤

# Power at your fingertips

Philips' topline Full HD set offers extensive processing tweaks – and you'll need to master them



**PHILIPS HAS LONG** had a reputation in the TV world for going further than most when it comes to video processing. This trend continues with its new 55PFL8008.

This is not automatically a good thing; sometimes picture quality can suffer through heavy-duty processing. Yet Philips seeks to mitigate this potential problem by placing at your disposal pretty much every aspect of the 55PFL8008's premium-level Perfect Pixel HD processing engine, so you can optimise the tweakery to your own tastes and type of content. Inevitably, this does make the TV more labour-intensive than most.

It doesn't help that the 55PFL8008's menus are both rather sluggish and rather intimidating in their presentation. And these issues sadly extend to its Smart TV interface, with menus that run tardily and look basic by modern standards.

The Philips' Smart features do include playback of plenty of multimedia file types and a recommendation system similar in intent but far less wide in its scope than that of Samsung. But as a further dent to its credibility, Philips' online platform currently carries relatively little video streaming content – although Netflix and LoveFilm are scheduled to appear this Summer.

The 55PFL8008 uses an edge LED array with local dimming, and it's an Active 3D TV – a fact which bodes well for its contrast versus the Passive 3D sets already covered.

Design-wise the 55PFL8008 is another looker, wearing its distinctive deep grey

stainless steel bezel and super-slim profile and frame well. Plus you get a built-in camera and Philips' distinctive Ambilight technology, which is rather addictive.

## Balanced performance

The 55PFL8008's pictures are predominantly excellent. For starters, it delivers a much better contrast range than most LED TVs. During the many tricky dark scenes of *The Dark Knight*, deep, convincing blacks appear alongside vivid colours and bright, pure whites.

The 55PFL8008 also impresses with its colour vibrancy, the naturalness of its colour tones, and the balance of its colour palette, which avoids blue or red bias after calibration.

Next, the 55PFL8008 delivers HD pictures so detailed and textured that at times you'd swear the screen must contain more than 1,920 x 1,080 pixels. This sharpness holds up when showing motion too, so long as you use the Perfect Natural Motion system on its lowest setting (don't go any higher than that, though, or pictures look processed). It can also go too far with some sources, leaving them looking noisy. But this is easily rectified via the TV's calibration options.

The 55PFL8008 continues to impress with its 3D images, which are punchy, sharp and detailed. However, they do suffer from noticeable crosstalk ghosting noise.

I have two small issues with the Philips' pictures (besides the fact you have to be careful with the TV's image settings). One is a faint trace of backlight clouding in corners

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active  
**ULTRA HD:** No. 1,920 x 1,080  
**TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; DVB-S2  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF input  
**SOUND:** 30W  
**BRIGHTNESS:** 450cd/m2  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** 500,000:1  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,235(w) x 723(h) x 32.5(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 19.5kg  
**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; local dimming edge LED system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; Smart TV online platform with basic recommendations system; two pairs of 3D glasses included; touchpad remote included; 1,400Hz motion processing; QWERTY keyboard on remote; Ambilight illumination system

during dark scenes, especially while watching 3D. The other is that standard-def can look noisy with noise reduction off, but rather soft with NR on.

Philips has squeezed a decent audio performance out of the 55PFL8008's skinny frame. The soundstage is wide with good dynamics and a reasonable supply of both bass and treble detail. My only complaint is that dialogue seems to emerge from somewhere outside of the TV's frame.

Ultimately this screen falls short of a couple of its rivals here on account of its currently lacklustre online features and the effort required to get the best out of it. Get past this and you have a strong picture performer. ➤



# Miniature IR Distribution Amplifier

The new IRBKIT Mini from Keene is a really tiny yet fully featured IR Distribution Amplifier. Compact and light enough to stick on the back of your display it's great for wall mounted Apple TV and similar installations. It also has a special "direct" input that can accept any manufacturers IR Blaster output and re-distribute to more emitters. With a USB power option for added convenience, this is a tiny yet powerful IR package.

## Fascia Mount Kit

Supplied with a Fascia mount receiver and single emitter this is designed to allow IR control of devices out of sight behind the display or cabinet.

[IRBKITMF] **£65.02** (inc mains USB supply)

[IRBKITMFC] **£47.43** (USB power cable only)

## Direct Input Kit

Supplied with a direct input cable (no receiver) and 2 x twin emitter wands this is the one to choose if you want to distribute the IR Blaster output from another device, (eg HDMI extender) to control up to four more devices

[IRBKITMD] **£61.40** (inc mains USB supply)

[IRBKITMDC] **£54.41** (USB power cable only)

## Key Features:

- USB Power Connection.
- Compact Size (60mm x 35mm x 20mm)
- Dual Outputs
- IR Receiver Input
- Direct Input



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# A serious contender

There's more to Samsung's 8000 Series LED than its glam design and Smart talents



**THE UE55F8000 HITS** the ground running with its design, which combines an on-trend slender bezel with a dark, glassy finish and built-in camera. However, other designs in this roundup are spectacular too, so the UE55F8000's styling alone won't be enough to carry Samsung's set to victory.

The TV increases its chances of success with its features. Connections are extensive, including four HDMI's, three USB's, and both LAN and Wi-Fi network options for DLNA file streaming and access to online services courtesy of Samsung's Smart TV platform.

The amount of online content is spectacular. In particular, it uniquely supports all the main UK broadcast catch-up TV services: BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4oD and Demand 5. Plus you get the key Netflix and LoveFilm subscription video streaming platforms, and numerous secondary VOD services that still appeal.

The UE55F8000 also grabs your attention with its five-window Smart Hub interface, and its sophisticated 'S-Recommendation' system that tracks your viewing habits and suggests related content. Speech and gesture control options will amuse tech-hedz.

The UE55F8000's Smart features can feel inscrutable in places though, and Samsung's Android/iOS app support is messy, requiring multiple different apps rather than everything being integrated into a single interface.

The set uses Samsung's latest Ultra Clear Panel design, featuring an improved edge LED lighting system and 'micro-dimming ultimate'

processing that breaks the image down into small blocks for processing, so it can, supposedly, accurately judge the optimum settings for the picture at any given moment.

It inevitably offers 3D, too. Being a Samsung TV, this means Active rather than Passive.

## Convincing contrast

Imagery is easily the best Samsung has produced from an LED TV yet. Particularly striking during a run-through of *The Dark Knight* is the set's contrast, which finds the UE55F8000 producing a deep and convincing black during the scenes where Batman rescues Gordon's family from Two-Face. The picture's overall brightness is reduced to get to these rich black hues, meaning images don't have quite as much dynamism as those of Sony's 55W905A also reviewed here. However, they still look wonderfully punchy and never suffer with the light blocking effect that affects other LED models. And the backlight clouding issues that have affected previous Samsung LED generations appear to have been conquered.

Sharpness and detail are superior. The Venice shootout in *Casino Royale* proves frighteningly real and crisp, aided by terrific motion handling. In fact, the image's sharpness is almost too much until you turn off the TV's edge enhancement option and nudge down the sharpness preset.

Colours are bold and dynamic, and tweaking the TV's settings (Samsung continues to struggle to deliver really useful picture presets) can help improve their

subtlety. A high brightness ensures the UE55F8000 produces effective 3D pictures too, as the brightness combats the natural dimming effect of Samsung's lightweight Active shutter spex. It's therefore easier to appreciate the Full HD detailing in stereoscopic Blu-rays.

The Samsung's sonics are fine. Its down-firing speakers are powerful, resulting in a large open soundstage underpinned by some clean low-end grunt.

All in all, this is a fine flagship TV from the Korean brand – Smart, stylish and an exceedingly good performer.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active  
**ULTRA HD:** No. 1,920 x 1,080  
**TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD and Freesat HD  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF inputs  
**SOUND:** 40W  
**BRIGHTNESS:** N/A  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** N/A  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,224.4(w) x 707.2(h) x 34.9(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 16.8kg  
**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; Micro-Dimming Ultimate system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; Samsung Smart TV online platform with extensive range of video streaming services; S-Recommendation system; two pairs of 3D glasses included; touchpad remote included; 1,000Hz motion processing; gesture and voice control



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# Colour like no other

Sony's Triluminos technology ensures its 55in W9 model packs a real picture punch



**AFTER EXPLODING BACK** on to the TV scene in 2012 with its stunning HX853 series, Sony is hoping to make just as much of a splash with that model's successors, as represented here by the 55W905A.

This set certainly advances Sony's cause with its looks. The frame around the 55in screen is gorgeously slender, yet still finds room for a 'Sense of Quartz' – otherwise known as a reflective angled turquoise highlight cut against the rest of the bezel. Also eye-catching is the silver box protruding from the TV's bottom edge, which emits a different LED light colour depending on which source you're using.

These sources could be connected via the set's quartet of HDMI's, three USBs and built-in Wi-Fi. The Wi-Fi (or Ethernet if you prefer) naturally allows streaming of files from DLNA-ready PCs and lets you access Sony's online platform. The latter is reasonably strong where video content is concerned, including Netflix, LoveFilm, BBC iPlayer, Sky News, Demand 5 and Sony's own Video Unlimited and World of Television services. However, the Smart interface is slightly crude versus the latest efforts of Panasonic, Samsung and LG.

Setup menus sport plenty of picture calibration tools, including white balance and colour management options, plus control over most parts of Sony's processing engine. The local dimming system previously employed to good effect on the HX853 range is on hand here, as is the brand's new-for-2013 Triluminos tech, which applies quantum dot colour filters

to edge-mounted LEDs to deliver a more vivid, wider colour palette.

## Able successor

The 55W905A's pictures are as good I'd hoped for. As with the HX853s, key to its success is an outstanding contrast performance, which sees rich, deep blacks in dark sequence (like Lincoln's night-time meeting with his 'vote pressure team' in Steven Spielberg's biopic) accompanied by bright whites and punchy colours in a more dynamic way than LED TVs are supposed to be capable of.

Punchier fare, meanwhile, like *The Muppets* Blu-ray, looks vibrant and richly saturated, clearly benefitting from the Triluminos edge LED system. Actually, the palette can look a bit too aggressive if you use Sony's Live Colour feature on any setting other than its lowest mode. Yet even with Live Colour deactivated, the 55W905A delivers subtler and more expressive colours than any other TV in this group test.

Motion handling is assured. *The Dark Knight's* action scenes retain a keen sharpness, and Sony's impressive MotionFlow processing is able to up detail retention without obliterating a film's sense of realism. The 55W905A's video processing is good enough, too, to upscale standard-def sources with excellent clarity.

With 3D the 55W905A continues to excel, mostly. Don any of the four free pairs of Active shutter glasses and the impact of the colours in 3D mode is startling. Also, detail levels are

high, motion is handled well, and the sense of 3D space is convincing. The only bad news is some occasional crosstalk ghosting, which does detract from the overall enjoyment.

Other general problems with the Sony are very rare appearances of light 'blocking' around small, bright objects and an unusually narrow viewing angle before the image's contrast takes a hit. But I could live with either of these issues in exchange for the TV's overall picture prowess.

The icing on the cake is the 55W905A's powerful, clean and layered audio performance, which comes courtesy of Sony's long-duct system and angled drivers that disperse their sonics off a lip in the TV's bezel.

Overall, this is a flatscreen that deserves its flagship status.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active  
**ULTRA HD:** No. 1,920 x 1,080  
**TUNER:** Freeview HD and Freesat HD  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; Ethernet; composite video input; RGB Scart input; RF inputs  
**SOUND:** 20W  
**BRIGHTNESS:** N/A  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** N/A  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,241(w) x 723(h) x 37(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 19.7kg  
**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; Triluminos LED system; local dimming system; DLNA multimedia playback; USB multimedia playback and recording; SEN online platform with multiple video streaming services; NFC support



# Final standings

**FOR MANY HOME** cinema fans, 55in is the new 'sweet spot' of TV sizes. Firstly, it's the largest and most movie-friendly size you can get before the law of diminishing returns kicks in and prices start to sky rocket. Secondly, it's the largest size at which you can find all the main TV players operating, meaning you've got plenty of choice.

Looking back over the five high-end 55in TVs we assembled for this group test, we've been able to discern a fairly distinct pecking order that interestingly finds the two Passive 3D contenders – LG's 55LA860W and Panasonic's TX-L55WT65 – bringing up the rear. Both these TVs (but especially the LG) suffer with some problems handling dark scenes that no serious movie fan can ignore.

This is a shame as both sets look gorgeous, have well-designed Smart TV interfaces and impress with bright footage. But for us contrast is the foundation of good pictures, and if you get that wrong, you're handicapped from the off.

In third place sits the Philips 55PFL8008. This TV's picture quality is very strong – good enough to rival our two winners for the vast majority of the time,

in fact, as long as you put the legwork in to ensure you have its countless processing options working in your favour. However, it loses out to our top two models on account of its sluggishly presented Smart features and improvable interface.

The only models left, then, are the Sony 55W905A and the Samsung UE55F8000. The Sony has the edge when it comes to picture quality, courtesy of its Triluminos system and ultra-clever local dimming array, but the Samsung has the edge where design and features are concerned, while also delivering excellent pictures.

Taking all this into account, it's impossible to separate the two. So we're declaring them joint first. Which you buy will boil down to what you personally value most in your next TV.



Samsung's UE55F8000 and Sony's KDL-55W905A (right) – superior LED flatscreens

## HCC VERDICT



### LG 55LA860W

→ £2,000 Approx → [www.lg.com/uk](http://www.lg.com/uk)  
→ Tel: 0844 847 5454

**HIGHS:** Beautiful design; bright pictures look great; Magic Remote; strong Smart TV interface

**LOWS:** Below average native black level response; weak local dimming

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

## HCC VERDICT



### Panasonic TX-L55WT65

→ £2,500 Approx → [www.panasonic.co.uk](http://www.panasonic.co.uk) → Tel: 0844 844 3852

**HIGHS:** Stunning looks; bright pictures can look exceptional

**LOWS:** Some contrast/local dimming distractions; expensive; online platform needs more VOD

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

## HCC VERDICT



### Philips 55PFL8008

→ £2,500 Approx → [www.philips.co.uk](http://www.philips.co.uk)  
→ Tel: 0844 338 0488

**HIGHS:** Lovely steel design; excellent picture quality; Ambilight

**LOWS:** Needs care with processing setup; sluggish smart interface; not enough mainstream video streaming

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

## HCC VERDICT



### Samsung UE55F8000

→ £2,500 Approx → [www.samsung.co.uk](http://www.samsung.co.uk) → Tel: 0330 726 7864

**HIGHS:** Terrific and stable 2D and 3D picture quality; sophisticated Smart UI

**LOWS:** Unhelpful picture presets; dark scenes lack a little punch vs very best local dimming TVs

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

## HCC VERDICT



### Sony Bravia KDL-55W905A

→ £2,300 Approx → [www.sony.co.uk](http://www.sony.co.uk)  
→ Tel: 0844 846 6555

**HIGHS:** Superb image and audio quality; good quantities of online video streaming; striking design

**LOWS:** A little 3D crosstalk; limited viewing angle

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

# Deck of delights

Samsung's BD-F7500 targets mid-range Blu-ray buyers with its mixture of old-school connections and cutting-edge media smarts. **Adrian Justins** likes what he sees and hears



**THE BD-F7500 IS** Samsung's flagship Blu-ray deck, featuring several enthusiast-friendly features including dual core processing, wireless networking, multimedia file streaming, dual HDMI sockets, and, ahem, 4K upscaling. Audiophiles and owners of some legacy AVRs will be drawn to its 7.1 multichannel analogue audio outputs, whilst the secondary HDMI output could be used for feeding hi-res digital audio to an amp which can't handle 4K or 3D video signals.

Anyone hoping to drive two displays, however, will be disappointed to discover that only one HDMI socket is capable of outputting video signals. Still, at least that sole socket is able to deliver an array of Smart TV services, the likes of which are rarely matched on other higher-end Blu-ray decks, especially those from Denon, Oppo and Pioneer. Further features include screen mirroring, web browsing, Wi-Fi direct and, of course, 3D playback.

All in all, a decent feature set for a mid-range price of just £250, although the design, build quality and remote control could be improved; the deck feels lightweight and Samsung's attempt to give the BD-F7500 an air of distinction by wrapping a brushed aluminium sweatband round the black plastic body looks better in photographs than in real life. The remote control is a small, chunky,

crowded affair – an app is available that avoids some of the handset's quirks, such as the Smart Hub button taking you to the Apps menu rather than the Smart Hub home page. Once you've found the hub, though, it's the jumping off point for a wealth of apps and

catchup services, plus DLNA media streaming. It's a pleasurable GUI to hang around in, too, although the Movies and TV Shows portal that serves up recommendations (partly based on your viewing habits) can annoy, as the service a title comes from (which may require a subscription) isn't revealed until you've selected it for viewing.

## Fast and furious

Disc loading is as speedy and smooth as riding in a Porsche down a new stretch of German motorway, compared with the pot-holed Essex B road experience of Samsung's entry-level BD-F6500. And in terms of performance it's a case of fun, fun, fun on the Autobahn. Movies look lustrous and detailed as the deck serves up supremely well resolved BD images; there's excellent clarity in the facial features of the scientists, and ornate background carvings of the gloomy caves, in *Prometheus*. When watching 3D movies on a Samsung UE46F7000, things are just as impressive, with convincing depth to Derek's groomsmen in the wedding despite their black, featureless suits. And there's a near absence of cross-talk, especially noticed during the pan down of the church tower.

But it's the BD-F7500's audio prowess that really satisfies, especially when using the multichannel analogue outputs, where the dynamism surpasses the HDMI bitstream performance. The Dolby TrueHD soundtrack from the crash scene in *Super 8* reveals an extraordinarily well crafted mix. Discretely delivered effects, such as a fly buzzing and firecrackers exploding, blend with softly spoken dialogue, creaking floorboards, papers rustling in the breeze and the violins of the score.

A multi-media marvel that delivers top-notch AV, the BD-F7500 is easily recommended – although at this price, you might want SACD playback ■

## SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes  
**UPSCALING:** Yes. To 2160p  
**MULTIREGION:** No. Region B BD/R2 DVD  
**HDMI:** 1 x v1.4 output; 1 x audio-only output  
**COMPONENT:** No  
**MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE:** Yes. 7.1  
**DIGITAL AUDIO:** Yes. Optical output  
**ETHERNET:** Yes  
**BUILT IN WI-FI:** Yes  
**SACD/DVD-A:** No/No  
**DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING:** Yes  
**DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM:** Yes  
**DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 46(h) x 201(d)mm  
**WEIGHT:** 1.7kg  
**FEATURES:** USB input; iOS and Android app control; AllShare Play; AllShare Cast; Video on demand apps including BBC Sport, BlinkBox, 4OD, BFI Player, YouTube, LoveFilm, Netflix, Vimeo; USB/DLNA media playback including FLAC, WAV, MKV and WMV; Screen mirroring; Wi-Fi Direct

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
3D Blu-ray deck

**POSITION:**  
Flagship model – big brother to the BD-F6500

**PEERS:**  
Pioneer BDP-450;  
Sony BDP-S790;  
Oppo BDP-103EU

## HCC VERDICT

### Samsung BD-F7500

→ £250 Approx → [www.samsung.co.uk](http://www.samsung.co.uk)  
 → Tel: 0330 7267864

**HIGHS:** Multichannel analogue audio output; excellent picture performance; slick operating system; impressive Smart TV selection

**LOWS:** Average build quality; ugly, unrefined remote; no Super Audio CD playback

**Performance** ★★★★★

**Design** ★★★★★

**Features** ★★★★★

**Overall** ★★★★★





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# Big and beautiful

Samsung's debut Ultra HD TV might be terrifyingly expensive, but [John Archer](#) reckons it's worth every penny. Honestly

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
Luxury 85in  
Ultra HD TV with  
Active 3D

**POSITION:**  
Miles above  
anything else in  
Samsung's TV range

**PEERS:**  
Sony KDL-  
84X9005A;  
LG 84LM960V

**WHEN I WAS** first told I would be doing an exclusive test of Samsung's UE85S9 TV, I suspected my review would be built around just one thing: the jaw-dropping £35,000 price tag. Having now spent many hours with the UE85S9 I'm no longer obsessing about its price. Instead the only thing my movie-loving brain is buzzing with is the unbelievable AV experience it offers. The UE85S9 can produce the single best picture quality I've ever seen from any TV – including rival Ultra HD delights such as Sony's X9 models and LG's 84LM960V.

Cynics will already be shaking their heads at such wanton hyperbole. But I've tested over a thousand TVs and there have been none I've wanted in my own home as much as the UE85S9. I'd better start explaining why...

First, some numbers: 8,294,400, 85 and 240. The 8,294,400 figure is the pixel

resolution of the UE85S9's screen, indicating that it's Samsung's first Ultra HD set. The 85 figure refers to the screen's size in inches, making the UE85S9 the biggest Ultra HD TV we've tested. And, finally, the 240 figure refers to the number of local zones supported by the UE85S9's direct LED lighting engine.

The last point is important, as it makes the UE85S9 the first UHD TV with a direct LED lighting array, where the LEDs sit behind the screen. An expensive approach vs edge LED, but it makes sense on a display as large as this. After all, as I've discovered in the past, illuminating a huge screen from the sides can cause difficulties with backlight uniformity. Having lights directly behind the screen makes brightness uniformity easier to achieve, and – in conjunction with local dimming, where clusters of the LEDs can have their brightness levels set individually – makes it easier to deliver levels of



contrast not possible with edge LED technology. By using such a high number of dimmable zones, the UE85S9 should also deliver its boosted contrast more accurately.

The Samsung's size matters too. While the Sony 65X9005A reviewed on p44 proves that Ultra HD can deliver stunning advantages at a relatively normal screen size, the format's appeal grows as TVs get bigger.

The UE85S9 wears its enormous size spectacularly well, thanks to the easel-style outer frame within which the screen literally hangs. Some may not welcome a design which exaggerates the TV's already massive dimensions, but I think it's an inspired decision.

There are practical benefits to the easel-like stand, too. First, it lets you tilt the screen with one hand. Second, tucked away within the frame is a 120W, 14-speaker array.

The UE85S9 shares two key features with more mainstream sets in Samsung's current TV range, including the brand's Smart TV engine and Evolution Kit technology, whereby

**'This 85in TV's impact punches you in the face – Ultra HD material looked like nothing I'd seen before'**

you can upgrade the TV with future chipsets. The Evolution Kit is significant, since it makes the UE85S9 the only current Ultra HD TV that could be upgraded to support the supposedly-forthcoming HDMI 2.0 standard.

### Eye-popping pictures

For all its cutting-edge specs and features, though, the biggest justification of the UE85S9's price is the eye-popping, unprecedented quality of its pictures.

Its impact practically punches you in the face. The native Ultra HD showreel of stunning tourist locations and beautiful food dishes Samsung provided (Why food? Who knows) looked like nothing I've seen before – not just because of the incredible amounts of detail, clarity and pixel density, but because of the supremely fine colour gradations and beautifully clean motion. It's hardly detrimental that these images are reproduced on an 85in screen – at this elevated level, the quality of UHD is enough to make your head spin.

Joining the extraordinary resolution and colour finesse is a superb contrast performance. Dark shots on the showreel revel in near pitch-perfect blacks that are achieved, moreover, without sacrificing shadow detail or the intense brightness and colour saturations of light elements of predominantly dark sequences. This sort of punch is exactly what I'd hope to see from a direct LED TV.

With native Ultra HD content currently rare, I was hoping for a strong upscaling performance. And that's exactly what I got. Blu-rays in particular look stunning, if anything exhibiting even more clarity and texture than they do on Sony's brilliant 65X9005A.

With *The Dark Knight*, for instance, there's an impressive amount of extra detail evident in buildings and vehicles during the sequence where Batman tips up The Joker's truck. Yet this detail is added without leaving the darkest areas looking noisy.

While upscaled 2D HD looks brilliant, upscaled 3D is nothing short of revolutionary. The other Ultra HD TVs we've tested employ the Passive 3D format to good effect, but Samsung's premium model is the first we've seen to go down the Active route, delivering its maximum resolution to each eye.

The results are incredible. During the *When Will My Life Begin* song in *Tangled*, the presentation of Rapunzel's colourful room is stunning, with the extra definition to the picture helping delineate a sense of space and depth beyond anything I've yet seen on a 3D TV. And with *Prometheus* the outdoor sequence where the crew approaches the alien structure for the first time becomes incredibly intense, thanks to the detail in the planet's surface and the more palpable sense of the enormity of the locations.

This 3D experience is being achieved via upscaling, of course; no native Ultra HD 3D sources are on Samsung's demo reel. The thought of what *bona fide* Ultra HD 3D might look like has got me excited by 3D again in a way I haven't been since, well, ever.

For all their general majesty, I did spot some flaws with the UE85S9's pictures: a faint glowing blue artefact occasionally visible round areas of fine detail, especially if they're moving (such as The Sandman's bag mask in *The Dark Knight*), and a light haloing around very bright objects when they appear against dark backgrounds – even the 240 zones of local dimming don't deliver light on quite a local enough level. But to some extent both these minor niggles are only noticeable because there's so much quality on show elsewhere.

And what of the TV's sonics? Well, the UE85S9's extensive speaker array ensures films are accompanied with a level of power, clarity, dynamic range and sheer, unadulterated massiveness – complete with expansive bass rumbles from the two onboard woofers – that never fails to impress.

### Prepare to drool

Obviously, most of use have zero chance of ever owning a UE85S9, but this doesn't make Samsung's flagship TV any less relevant. It shows the benefits of what direct LED and Active 3D can bring to the UHD party, and sets us drooling at the prospect of what Samsung's upcoming smaller Ultra HD TVs might offer ■

### ON THE MENU



→ The UE85S9 sports the same user interface as Samsung's F8000 series Smart TVs – meaning you get a colourful, hi-res home screen that acts as a launchpad for the TV's myriad features. We'd have preferred an exclusive, 'premium' iteration, though

### SPECIFICATIONS

**3D:** Yes. Active  
**ULTRA HD:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160  
**TUNER:** Freeview HD; Freesat HD  
**CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI; IR output; component video output; RF input; satellite input; minijack audio output; Ethernet; 3 x USB; Scart; composite video input, optical digital audio output; CI slot (all on external connection unit)  
**SOUND:** 14-speaker system outputting 120W  
**BRIGHTNESS:** N/A  
**CONTRAST RATIO:** N/A  
**DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,990.9(w) x 1,085(h) x 55.6(d)mm  
**WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 58.6kg  
**FEATURES:** Ultra HD upscaling; native playback of Ultra HD photos and video; Dolby 5.1 audio decoding and virtual surround processing; Samsung Smart TV system; extensive calibration tools; direct LED lighting with 240 local dimming zones; tiltable screen; multimedia playback via DLNA and USB; Super Narrow bezel; timeshift vis USB; Smart Interaction 2.0

### HCC VERDICT



#### Samsung UE85S9

→ £35,000 approx → [www.samsung.co.uk](http://www.samsung.co.uk)  
 → Tel: 0330 7267864

**HIGHS:** Ultra HD pictures look magical; impressive upscaling; sound quality is insanely good; the design is a work of art  
**LOWS:** Marginal haloing during dark scenes; occasional bluish noise over fine details; I can't afford one

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

## Blu-ray on a budget

Toshiba's BDX5400 is a reasonable bet if you're after a Smart 3D player for less, says **Steve May**

**TOSHIBA'S BDX5400 IS** a silver bullet of a Blu-ray player. All curved edges, hidden controls and cat-eye green power light, it has designer aspirations that belie the bargain price tag. The specification is ambitious, too, with 3D disc support, integrated Wi-Fi and Miracast mirroring for mobile devices.

Understandably, backside connections are somewhat spartan. There's HDMI, a coaxial digital audio output, Ethernet and a USB reader. The general user-interface mimics Toshiba's concentric TV UI, and while it's a few pixels short of being the polished graphical article, navigation is at least intuitive. File support both local and across a network is limited to little more than MKV, MPEG, MP3 and AAC, and occasional hangs seemed to indicate the player was experiencing problems navigating my media server.

The BDX5400 may be Smart but it doesn't offer a whole heap of online content, with just Netflix, YouTube and Picasa on tap. However

the provision of Miracast goes some way to mitigating against this shortfall, as whatever you're viewing on your smartphone can be thrown to the screen via the player. As a disc spinner, the BDX5400 does a perfectly fine job. Its HD video performance is blister-pack sharp and you can always delegate audio quality to a connected AV receiver by bitstreaming lossless audio soundtracks. When it comes to loading speeds, the BDX5400 merits an average rating; a Java-heavy disc (Goldfinger) loads in 48s, while a simpler platter took 33s.

Overall, the BDX5400 is an attractive-looking budget bet. While its multimedia support is half-hearted, it largely does what it sets out to do, and offers value for money ■



**The BDX5400 is a budget deck with designer styling**

### HCC VERDICT

Toshiba BDX5400 → £90

Overall ★★★★★

## Cutting the chord, Parrot fashion

**Benny Har-Even** hopes these designer Bluetooth headphones do more than just squawk

**'THE WORLD'S MOST** advanced headphones' is, as bold claims go, right up there. But it has to be said, Parrot's boast for



the Ziks does stand up to scrutiny. Crafted by designer Philippe Starck, the Ziks' ear pads are covered with minimalist soft-touch black plastic, while the adjustable leather headband and memory foam ensure comfort.

The Ziks' *piece de resistance* is wireless streaming via Bluetooth. With an iPhone, iPad and Macbook Pro the connection proved reliable. However, it proved finicky with a Windows 7 laptop, while the PS3 lacks the necessary A2DP profile support.

Designed primarily with iOS and Android in mind, an accompanying app lets you enable noise cancelling, which is genuinely effective. A 'Concert Hall' processing effect essentially adds echo in various stages, and is gimmicky, but the equaliser presets are more convincing and serve to greatly enliven the soundstage, adding dynamism to a sound that is otherwise

a little thick in the mid-range. The Parrot's tone suits the bombast of *Skyfall* well, but less so with a rip of *Rocky*.

Another neat touch, literally, is that you can play, pause and skip just by touching and swiping the right ear panel – very *Tron*-esque.

The downside to this bag of tricks is power drain; I got barely five hours cordless listening. Fortunately, the 'phones can still be used via cable and will sound even better with such a connection.

The Ziks are undoubtedly pricey, but if you want to go wireless you'll struggle to find a more compelling option out there ■

### HCC VERDICT

Parrot Zik → £300

Overall ★★★★★

**The Zik headphones continue Parrot's association with designer Philippe Starck**



# A media player on a diet

This small-scale streamer mixes an app store with DLNA playback but, says **Adrian Justins**, it lacks the vital features that would make it an essential purchase

## WESTERN DIGITAL HAS taken

its chunky WD TV Live media streamer and by removing one or two features, compressed it into a box that's uncannily similar in size and shape to the Apple TV, inevitably inviting comparison. There are several significant differences, not least of which is that the Play sells for a third less than its rival, and unlike the iTunes-constrained Apple TV, supports a list of file formats longer than your arm, including 1,920 x 1,080p 24fps video and Dolby TrueHD audio. But for AV enthusiasts there are some notable absentees, including MPEG-2 and, most annoyingly, DTS audio. It also won't handle protected content from iTunes or other premium services, and the likes of LoveFilm, 4OD, Blinkbox and ITV Player are not in its portfolio of video-on-demand apps.

The box itself is so small that you'll hardly notice from across a room how plasticky it is. Connectivity includes a 3.5mm analogue AV output, plus HDMI and digital optical audio options. An analogue adapter cable (composite video and stereo audio output) is supplied, but you'll need your own Euro plug adapter and digital cables.

The handset feels cheap and light, with spongy buttons, but does have a dedicated Netflix button and four others that can be assigned as shortcuts to other apps or tools. The iOS/Android smartphone app provides a superior operating experience.

Setup is awkward, thanks largely to the use of indecipherable icons in the menu system. I eventually worked out that the menu is highly customisable with options to select the splash screen image from a handful of pre-installed photos or your own

networked JPEG files. You can also play with preferences for slideshows, music and video playback. The home screen acts as a favourites page and you can reposition icons, remove them or introduce others from the collection of apps, which are handily split in to six genres including Movies & TV, Web Videos, Music and Photos.

## An AV-lite experience

The WD TV Play doesn't have enough power to browse network shares but it can detect UPnP and DLNA servers and should play files stored on them, as well as locally on its USB socket. Folder structures are often not recognised and the menu looks desperately unexciting. File compatibility supposedly extends to most common containers and files but some USB-connected MP4 and WMA files wouldn't load and an M4V file actually crashed the box. It's also fussy about which files it will pick up over DLNA, with FLAC and higher bit-rate MKV files disappearing from the show.

Apps range from the eclectic Snag Films (a receptacle of obscure low bit-rate Hollywood movies), to the much more useful iPlayer and Netflix. Stability is the major problem, with fast forwarding and rewinding sometimes causing playback to derail. Flickr allows you to only see photostreams and not collections or sets, plus photos are often shown in the wrong aspect ratio. These issues are symptomatic of the overall app experience. I feel the product could have been tested and refined a bit more before it was unleashed on the public. So, while the WD TV Play promises much, it falters too often in its delivery ■

## SPECIFICATIONS

**HDD:** No. Media player only

**CONNECTIONS:** HDMI output; digital optical audio; analogue AV; USB; Ethernet

**DIMENSIONS:** 106(w) x 28(h) x 105(d)mm

**WEIGHT:** 0.14kg

**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; DLNA and uPnP support; supplied with remote control, batteries, composite AV cable, AC adapter and Quick Install guide; claimed file support includes AVI, MKV, MP4/MOV, WMV9, FLV, JPEG, GIF, TIFF, BMP, PNG, MP3, WAV, PCM, LPCM, WMA, AAC, FLAC and Dolby TrueHD; SlingPlayer compatible; Flixster, Viewster, Netflix, Yupp TV, Snag Films and iPlayer video-on-demand; Spotify premium, Deezer, Shoutcast, Live 365 and Tuneln music services; Facebook, Twitter and Picasa apps

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:** DLNA media player with app portal

**POSITION:** The most affordable of Western Digital's three Live-branded streamers

**PEERS:** Apple TV; WD TV Live; Sony SMP-N200

## HCC VERDICT

**WD TV Play**

→ £60 Approx → [www.wdc.com](http://www.wdc.com)

→ Tel: 00800-27549338

**HIGHS:** Compact and portable; customisable menus; file support over USB; affordable

**LOWs:** Unreliable app playback; no DTS or MPEG-2 support; poor remote

**Performance** ★★★★★

**Design** ★★★★★

**Features** ★★★★★

**Overall** ★★★★★

# Home cinema

**Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?**

**Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.**

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

## Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema  
so good you'll believe  
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing home cinema on a DIY basis may leave the system performing at way below its optimum level.

# Confused ?



## What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

## Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

## Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

## Our Top20 AV shops in the country

### SOUTH

#### Chelmsford

##### RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245  
[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

#### Kingston-upon-Thames

##### INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick.  
020 8943 3530  
[www.infidelity.co.uk](http://www.infidelity.co.uk)

#### Maidenhead

##### AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995  
[www.audiovenue.com](http://www.audiovenue.com)

#### Norwich

##### MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street. 01603 627134  
[www.martinshifi.co.uk](http://www.martinshifi.co.uk)

#### Rayleigh, Essex

##### RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street. 01268 779762

##### CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932  
[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

#### Southend-on-Sea

##### RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255  
[www.rayleighhifi.com](http://www.rayleighhifi.com)

#### Tunbridge Wells

##### KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough.  
01892 535007  
[www.kenthomecinema.co.uk](http://www.kenthomecinema.co.uk)

### LONDON

#### Ealing

##### AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703  
[www.audiovenue.com](http://www.audiovenue.com)

### N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500  
[www.grahams.co.uk](http://www.grahams.co.uk)

### SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.  
020 7924 2040  
[www.oandlhifi.co.uk](http://www.oandlhifi.co.uk)

### MIDLANDS

#### Coventry

##### FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200  
[www.frankharvey.co.uk](http://www.frankharvey.co.uk)

#### Nottingham

##### CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.  
0115 9584404  
[www.castlesoundvision.com](http://www.castlesoundvision.com)

#### Solihull

##### MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road.  
0121 742 0254  
[www.musicmatters.co.uk](http://www.musicmatters.co.uk)

### NORTH

#### York

##### SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.  
01904 627108  
[www.soundorg.co.uk](http://www.soundorg.co.uk)



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

[www.top20uk.info](http://www.top20uk.info)



## STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY ..... ★★★★★  
SERVICE ..... ★★★★★  
FACILITIES ..... ★★★★★  
VERDICT ..... ★★★★★

# ...Talk to the experts

# Network storage gets appy

**Martin Pipe** places his cherished media files in the hands of Synology's new two-bay DS213j NAS, and finds he can access them from almost anywhere

## NOT SO LONG

ago, a NAS (Network Attached Storage) box was just that – a hard-drive, slung on your network, that acted as a repository of files to other networked devices. Synology's DS213j takes the concept further. This pretty white box is the network equivalent of a Swiss-army knife. And yes, it will deal out data to computers and automatically back up vital files.

Yet in some respects it's more like a smartphone – with similar internet-friendliness and attention to ease of use. The aforementioned back-up feature is one of a series of apps that you can install via the box's web interface, which resembles a computer's operating system more than anything. Indeed, Synology places a lot of emphasis on this internal software, known here as DSM 4.2.

Before you can get to grips with such pleasantries, though, the DS213j has to be readied. As supplied, it lacks hard drives. Two 3.5in SATA types can be installed, each with a capacity of up to 4TB (SSDs are supported, too). Install a pair and you have 8TB at your disposal. An alternative is RAID-1 disk-mirroring, where if one drive starts to fail, you should be able to recover any missing data from the other. A USB port is provided for local backup.

Synology's website will locate the DS213j on your network; a 'web assistant' initialises the drives. You can then connect and get into DSM 4.2, where you can check disk health and how the box's 512MB memory and 1.2GHz CPU are being used, and perform basic NAS

operations like firewalls and making the device accessible to your network (Windows, Mac and Linux/NFS protocols are supported).

Once installed you can explore the various apps offered; currently, a choice of over 40. A key one

would be the DLNA media server, which reliably served photos, music and video to a number of devices including an A.C. Ryan PlayOnHD media-box, a Cambridge Audio BD player and an Onkyo AVR. Move content into the relevant folders and it's there for streaming.

In the package manager, you'll also find a nifty BitTorrent client, iTunes server and Logitech Media Server (for Squeezeboxes). Other apps include e-commerce tools, WordPress, support for IP security cameras and a mail server.

A wizard-driven EZ Internet function configures the DS213j for remote access via a DDNS (dynamic DNS) web address – Synology offers these free, if you don't have one. Before I could get it to work, I had to reset both NAS and router, but once you're connected, you install the free DS Audio and DS Video apps on your smartphone and you'll be able to play NAS content. It's handy, but even with buffering, streaming video to a Samsung 3G 'phone was rather choppy, as no transcoding from the original files is offered. No such problems were encountered with DS Audio, presumably because bitrates are much lower; furthermore, FLACs and WAV files can be converted on the fly to easier-to-digest MP3 streams.

## Sophisticated solution

On the whole this sophisticated but affordable NAS is friendly and works well. The app-based approach proves to be very useful; Synology's DS213j definitely points the way forward ■



## SPECIFICATIONS

**HDD:** None supplied – provides two bays for 3.5in SATA drives (max capacity 8TB); 2.5in drives require optional disk holder

**CONNECTIONS:** 2 x USB; Ethernet

**DIMENSIONS:** 165(h) x 100(w) x 225.5(d)mm

**WEIGHT:** 0.9kg

**FEATURES:** DLNA media server; BitTorrent client; iTunes and Logitech Media servers; Synology Hybrid RAID, Basic, JBOD, RAID 0, RAID 1 support; 17dB running noise; two-year warranty; wake on LAN/WLAN feature; Synology Disk Station Manager software; DS Video and Audio apps; Wi-Fi via additional dongle; 1.2GHz CPU; DDR3 512MB internal memory

## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:** NAS device with app support

**POSITION:** Part of Synology's DiskStation consumer range

**PEERS:** Western Digital My Book Live; Iomega StorCenter ix2-200

## HCC VERDICT

### Synology DS213j

→ £180 Approx → [www.synology.com](http://www.synology.com)  
→ Tel: 01908 587422

**HIGHS:** Powerful app-based approach; cloud and internet functionality; designed for ease of configuration

**LOWS:** No transcoding for most video; getting EZ Internet to work; extra hardware needed for 2.5in drives

**Performance** ★★★★★

**Design** ★★★★★

**Features** ★★★★★

**Overall** ★★★★★



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# Accessorize me!

## Portable AirPlay speakers

Playing your digital music files wherever you want has never been easier thanks to wireless streaming and battery-toting speakers. **Gordon Kelly** is on the move

**AIRPLAY HAS A** lot to answer for. Over the years it has been difficult to set up, painfully expensive to integrate and it remains exclusive to Apple-approved hardware. So why do we put up with it? Because the end results are worth it.

AirPlay is the purists' wireless format of choice. Sure, Bluetooth is popping up in every cheap portable speaker on the market, but Bluetooth dramatically compresses audio while the wider bandwidth of AirPlay enables it to stream even the highest-quality recording without compromise. Furthermore AirPlay is flexible. It takes seconds to switch streaming

to different speakers, making it ideal for multiroom setups, and it has recently overcome its restriction to home networks – allowing it to reach a whole new market with the premium, portable speakers we have on test here. And, as home cinema enthusiasts will know, AirPlay's support for video in recent years has also seen it become increasingly influential in conjunction with Apple TV for a place within many cinema setups.

### Ruling the roost

Caveats do remain. A licence-free lossless alternative, Wi-Fi Direct, is pushing for your

attention and the buffering AirPlay does to ensure smooth playback can cause a slight lag in responding to playback commands. But for now AirPlay still rules the roost.

'AirPlay is flexible – it takes seconds to switch to different speakers, making it ideal for multiroom'

Approx £600 → [www.bang-olufsen.com](http://www.bang-olufsen.com)

## Bang & Olufsen Beolit 12

A premium solution with a quirky design



**B&O ISN'T KNOWN** for its restraint so to see it produce a portable AirPlay speaker that looks like a picnic basket is something of a surprise. That said, it is beautifully built – and at 230 x 190 x 130mm, quite compact. Nice touches include a rear compartment to store its power cable, a durable aluminium speaker grill, grippy rubber tray lid for resting your iPhone and USB port for charging any connected device.

See past the Beolit 12's conservative looks and there is some of B&O's usual madness inside, namely a potent 120W amp powering a 4in bass driver and brace of 2in tweeters.

The Beolit 12 packs a 120W amp and 2.1 driver array

The word to sum up the Beolit 12's audio performance is 'powerful'. Watts rarely tell the whole story, but in packing such a powerful amplifier into such a compact enclosure it brings predictable results.

Bass benefits most and its reproduction of thumping low frequencies in The Kill's *No Wow* is the best I've heard from a portable speaker. Midrange is also full and expansive, doing justice to Yndi Halda's epic 12-minute soundscape *We Flood Empty Lakes*. Completing the hat-trick is detail in the high frequencies, with the guitar noodling of John Butler Trio clear and precise. It is also by far the loudest speaker on test here.

If I have a complaint about the Beolit 12 it's that it can be too precise and clinical. I admire its audio performance, but I wasn't consistently moved by it. Battery life is also fairly mediocre at just four hours via AirPlay. Even so, if you can afford it, I doubt the B&O will disappoint.

### HCC VERDICT

Bang & Olufsen Beolit 12 → £600

Overall ★★★★★



# Bose SoundLink Air

Second-gen speaker embraces Apple

## THE PREVIOUSLY BLUETOOTH-ONLY

SoundLink range gets its first AirPlay option with the aptly named SoundLink Air. AirPlay isn't the only departure, though, as Bose makes styling changes as well. The retro angular look has gone in favour of gentle curves, while the integrated cover of the other SoundLink models is removed altogether.

The rugged build quality befits Bose's premium reputation, and at 2.1kg it is reasonably portable, although you'll have to pay £90 for the optional rechargeable lithium-ion battery.

Setup is a little more involved than I'd like. Without a dedicated app to walk you through, the SoundLink must be plugged into your computer over USB to detect your network's wireless settings and you're guided along via the Bose website. This also means it's only a semi-portable speaker, as it can only stretch as far as the Wi-Fi signal to which it is paired. An alternative is to hookup via 3.5mm jack,

but that somewhat destroys the point of having AirPlay.

The SoundLink gets back into my good books once playback begins. The characteristic rich Bose sound is evident in spades, doing justice to the thick bass lines in The Prodigy's *Invader's Must Die* yet picking out the detailed plucking in the delightful *Isaac* by Bear's Den. It's also reasonably loud, though its party trick is the ability to link multiple Airs together to stream music around a home.

With its battery on top the Air's total £390 ticket may be tough to swallow, but this is an attractive, well-constructed and impressively performing speaker – with a few niggles.



Bose has revamped the SoundLink design for this AirPlay model

## HCC VERDICT

Bose SoundLink Air → £300

Overall ★★★★★

Approx £330 → [www.libratone.com](http://www.libratone.com)

# Libratone Zipp

A style-conscious speaker that hopes to be a wolf in sheep's clothing



**EVERY GROUPTTEST NEEDS** an oddball and here the Libratone Zipp is it. The style cries out 'psychedelic furry Pringles tube', but its cylindrical design has charm and revels in its desire to be different. Furthermore, build quality is excellent and its 'handpicked wool from Italy' covers are interchangeable to keep fickle fashionistas content.

Happily the Zipp's appeal is far from skin deep. Connectivity is first-rate, with AirPlay supported by Libratone's own 'PlayDirect' wireless technology that lets the Zipp travel far from home. DLNA is also bundled to connect non-Apple devices, along with a 3.5mm jack, and Zipp's can be paired together like the Bose SoundLink Air for multiroom streaming. Setup for each is simple thanks to a Libratone App Store app which guides you step by step. Lastly, like the B&O contender, hidden under the Zipp's carrying strap is a USB port from which any device can connect and charge.

Tech specs suggest beauty and brains should be matched by a sizeable audio punch. The Zipp has a 2.1 setup with a 4in bass driver and two 1in ribbon tweeters, backed up by a 60W amplifier and Libratone's patented 'FullRoom' sound dispersal system.

Unfortunately, the Libratone never feels quite like the sum of its parts. Bass and midrange performance is strong, making it ideal for hip hop or chillout fare, but it comes at the expense of higher frequencies, which can be drowned out as detail is lost. The Zipp won't go as loud as its amplification figure would have you believe, either, and when cranked up to maximum volume its potential eight-hour battery life drops to under four hours.

The asking price is the other elephant in the room. The Libratone's design and functionality just about justifies it, but I'd place the audio itself closer to the £250 mark.

## HCC VERDICT

Libratone Zipp → £330

Overall ★★★★★

# Pioneer SMA3

Well connected and keenly priced

**PIONEER ISN'T KNOWN** for its portable speakers, but the SMA3 jumps out of left field to cause a real surprise. This isn't expected from the design, which can best be described as inoffensive, nor its weight which is heavy at 3.3kg. Build materials aren't great either, the SMA3 is predominantly plastic, but it is well put together and – usefully – splash proof.

The SMA3 also packs in even more connectivity than the Libratone Zipp. AirPlay, Wi-Fi Direct, DLNA and even HTC's 'Connect' proprietary standard are all included, with the former appealing to iDevice owners and Wi-Fi Direct offering lossless audio for everyone else. The SMA3 also packs a 3.5mm jack and USB port which configures an AirPlay device just by plugging into it and doubles up as a charger.

Equally unusual is the SMA3's driver arrangement. Dual 3in woofers accompany a 1in tweeter and a bass port reflex system with twin 10W amplifiers. The end result is mixed. The SMA3 can't match the low-frequency

response of the other speakers on test and it doesn't offer the clearest highs either. The upside is that audio is well balanced, but its weaker amplifiers mean volume is far from room-shaking.

But consider the asking price. At £250, I wouldn't expect the SMA3 to be up to the level of its more expensive counterparts and if you hunt around online it can even be found for under £200. Furthermore, battery life is the best here, lasting over five hours using AirPlay and eight hours via a wired connection.

So if you want a flexible speaker and can compromise on quality, you'll find this a bargain.



The SMA3 incorporates AirPlay, DLNA and Wi-Fi Direct

## HCC VERDICT

Pioneer SMA3 → £250

Overall ★★★★★

# Final standings

**OUR OVERRIDING FEELING** is that none of these AirPlay speakers is perfect. Faults exist in each – whether it be performance, portability or price – and as such a group test winner is more dependent on your personal needs than a particular stand out candidate.

If money is no option, then the clear winner of our roundup is the £600 **Bang & Olufsen Beolit 12**. This rather odd-looking slab of Danish design delivers the best audio performance, aided by its 120W power plant. It's also beautifully built (if a little heavy), can go extremely loud and offers a decent battery life.

**Pioneer's SMA3**, on the other hand, is a budget jack of all trades. Only its range of connectivity is truly outstanding (it'll stream audio from practically any device), but it is a plucky speaker which will delight those less willing to splash serious cash.

Lagging behind those two is the **Libratone Zipp**. This certainly has the most character, is

the most portable and arguably the most cleverly designed, but it needs a better high frequency performance and greater volume to win our affection.

Last comes the **Bose SoundLink Air**, which betters the Zipp and SMA3's audio performance, but can't leave the home without reverting to wired playback, and even then requires an optional (and expensive) battery. That said, it does make for a good multiroom solution and is neatly designed.

The search for the perfect AirPlay speaker goes on...





# FAB

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# DIGITAL COPY

**Mark Craven** is hardly surprised that 3D broadcasters are suffering – but believes the immersive, inventive format can and will live on in cinemas

**IN THE SAME** week that 3DTV owners were able to engross themselves in the BBC's stereoscopic coverage of the Wimbledon tennis championship, the Corporation announced that it was putting its 3D broadcast plans on hold. In fact, in a matter of a few days, the company's Head of 3D, Kim Shillinglaw, went from being seemingly enthusiastic about funny glasses viewing to bleakly pessimistic.

There I was, patiently charging my Active spex for an afternoon spent trying to ignore the fact I was wearing them, when I read that Shillinglaw had announced to the *Radio Times* that she'd 'never seen a very big appetite for 3D television in the UK,' and that 'watching 3D is quite a hassly experience in the home.' Earlier that week she's said the BBC was 'delighted to provide live 3D coverage as this year's Championships reach a climax.'

The sad truth is that Shillinglaw is undoubtedly right. Watching 3DTV is a faff. Apart from the glasses charging, or glasses cleaning, or glasses trying-to-work-out-where-you-put-them, there are the light issues (you need to shut the curtains, basically), the viewing angles, and remembering to check the EPG to see what's on in 3D in the first place (a situation not helped by this year's Wimbledon coverage being relegated to Red Button access now that the Beeb can no longer use its BBC HD channel for 3D). The latter is known in the telly business as making an appointment to view; I'm much more likely to miss my appointment to view entirely and watch things via catch-up.

Another problem with 3D in the home is the content. I'm flabbergasted that someone decided to broadcast the Queen's Christmas speech in 3D in the first place, not by the poor stereoscopic viewing figures. As for sports broadcasts, again I'm not sure why anyone thought these were the natural home

for 3D. Perhaps it was the sheer amount of available content, because **the sideways moving nature of, say, a typical football broadcast hardly screams spine-tingling stereoscopic immersion.**

In fact, beyond some one-off nature programmes, I can't think of any 3DTV broadcast that's really excited me. Apart from films, of course...

## Spectacles for your spex

Think of your favourite 3D film moment, and I'm certain it will involve a sense of spectacle that is unlikely to ever occur by accident during a live sports broadcast. The star-map sequence from *Prometheus*, Milla Jovovich's slo-mo, water-soaked scrap in *Resident Evil: Afterlife*, the lightcycle race in *Tron: Legacy* – all of these make two people hitting a ball to one another seem deathly dull.

3D is at its best when it's been painstakingly crafted – a reason why many post-production 3D conversions aren't as impressive as their native stereoscopic rivals. My choice 3D cuts have all been scripted, storyboarded, rehearsed, shot and edited by directors given plenty of time and heaps of money to get it absolutely right, often with subject matter that is pure fantasy. I don't want to take anything away from the work of TV 3D production teams, but there's only so much you can do with someone standing in front of a Christmas tree.

A recent visit to my local cinema showed plenty of people still paying extra to watch a movie in 3D. We appreciate the format when it's served to us on a large scale, with someone else's glasses. The BBC may be putting its own productions on hold, but I'm glad that Hollywood isn't ■

*Is the BBC right to stop trialling 3D broadcasts?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)*

**Mark Craven** would watch the Queen's Christmas speech if it was directed by James Cameron, mixed in Dolby Atmos and shown in cinemas a week early





# FILM FANATIC

If Hollywood is going to continue its love affair with superheroes, **Anton van Beek** considers another possible home for a much wider range of comic book adaptations

**JUDGING FROM THE** reactions that the recent superhero blockbuster *Man of Steel* garnered in some corners of the media, it appears that there's a growing army of filmgoers who are sick to the back teeth of superhero movies. And this isn't simply coming from a position of intellectual snobbery – many of these same people freely confess to having enjoyed the likes of the *Bad Boys* and *Fast & Furious* films (take a bow HCC editor Mark Craven).

As it happens, I don't have a problem with superhero movies at all. You get the good (*Avengers Assemble*) and the bad (*The Dark Knight Rises*) just like any other film genre – and from personal experience the former more than make up for the latter. The problem I have is that **this myopic focus on superhero stories comes at the cost of excluding a plethora of other comic book genres** just as deserving of their time on the screen.

Take a look at Art Spiegelman's two-volume graphic novel series *Maus*. Winner of numerous awards (including a Pulitzer Prize), this memoir of Spiegelman's father's own experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor depicts the events using different types of anthropomorphised animals to represent different factions (Jewish mice, German cats, and so on) to highlight the absurdity of splitting the human race along such arbitrary lines. And, in the wake of the superb 2007 adaptation of Marjane Satrapi's autobiographic *Persepolis* and its depiction of life in Iran during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, it's easy to see how *Maus* could also be adapted as an animated film.

If that's a little too highbrow and you fancy something more action-packed, what about Frank Miller's six-issue series *Ronin* (a *Highlander*-esque tale of a samurai reincarnated in a dystopian future

New York); Jonathan and Joshua Luna's *Girls* (a small US town is attacked by flesh-eating, egg-laying aliens who take the form of naked women); or Tim Seeley's *Hack/Slash* (a young woman turns the tables on supernatural 'slashers' and dedicates her life to hunting them down)?

## Smaller screen, bigger scope?

Perhaps the best hope for adaptations of non-superhero comic material lies not on the bigscreen, but on the small one. After all, US cable network AMC has been on a roll for several years now with its record-breaking TV adaptation of Robert Kirkman's horror comic *The Walking Dead* (pictured).

The long-form episodic nature of television programming makes it the ideal medium for comic adaptations. Consider the amount of time (and money) that has been wasted trying to cram the essence of Neil Gaiman's 75-issue fantasy series *The Sandman* into a script for a two-hour movie. Why bother when you could just let it breath across five 12-episode seasons on television?

The same can also be said of *Y: The Last Man*. Brian K Vaughn's dystopian sci-fi saga about the only man to survive a plague that wipes out every male mammal on the planet ran for 60 issues and has been mooted for years as a film vehicle for Shia LaBeouf. But the writers continue to struggle to cut the globetrotting narrative down in a way that would make it work as a movie and still function as a coherent version of the source material.

So I say let Hollywood have the superheroes. For the most part, other comic book genres would be much better served by the increased narrative scope offered by being made for the smaller screen ■

*Are you fed up of superhero movies – or do you want even more? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

**Anton van Beek** is hoping a movie adaptation of Garth Ennis and Amanda Conner's 2002 comic *The Pro* will surface, despite the mature content...





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# Certified: AV-Holic!

A weather-related mishap resulted in AV-Holic **Gary McWilliams** finally fulfilling his dream of a home cinema room...



Film fanatic Gary had his first projector when he was just three

'**THE CINEMA** I have now came about following a Winter storm when a tree fell on the house!' explains long-term *HCC* reader Gary McWilliams when asked about his dedicated system. 'We had to move out of our bedroom so that repairs could be made. I realised that the vacated bedroom could be the ideal location for a small home cinema, and so negotiations with the "management" commenced.

As with all negotiations, compromises were necessary, specifically that the room could still be used for other purposes, including as a dressing room and a relaxation area. This means furniture needed to be easily removable. And, of course, Gary had to complete the whole project without going over budget.

'After many evenings spent pouring over previous projects in *HCC*, a short list of requirements was agreed upon,' says our AV-Holic. 'With a tape measure in hand the room design took shape. Based upon typical projector throw ratios I was confident that I could build a cinema that would include a 6ft screen, that could be filled comfortably by a projector, and let the room still serve the additional functions required.

'To keep costs down I did most of the work myself over weekends and evenings, over a six-month period. Only the plastering and carpet-laying was completed by professionals.'

## Stars in his eyes

A difficult part of the build, we're told, was the inclusion of the colour-changing fibre optic ceiling, as the room is in the roof area of a bungalow, so there was no access to the ceiling from above. A false ceiling was therefore constructed and installed. The result, says Gary, is 'great and was worth the effort.'

The matt purple colour scheme was chosen by Gary's wife Pauline. 'Although I was initially sceptical, the effect is stunning and surreal. With the blackout blinds closed on the Velux windows, the room is virtually pitch black and really brings the picture to life.'

Gary's room already had a barrier in the form of a wall to accommodate a chimney from downstairs, so he decided to mirror that feature on the other side – 'it was not financially viable or practical to remove the chimney' – by building an area to accommodate kit, including the REL R-505 subwoofer. 'This "dummy" feature provided an alcove for the 6ft screen, and enabled me to





Easily removable furniture was one of the room's prerequisites



The cinema as it was before the six-month makeover project began



Gary is continually adding to his Blu-ray collection



Kit is housed in a second 'dummy' chimney breast

incorporate access panels to the equipment area to deal with all the cabling.'

Much of the room's hardware had already been purchased, but a new addition is an Optoma HD25 projector. The original plan was to move a Panasonic PT-AX200 from the living room, but Gary reveals his wife suggested they invest in another PJ. 'Who was I to argue? After seeing demos at the Bristol Show I settled on the Optoma. All I needed to do was ensure

Gary's custom-made AV rack houses two BD players



that I located it correctly to accommodate its limited zoom ability.'

Other equipment includes a Panasonic DMP-BDT210 Blu-ray player with twin HDMI outputs, one of which is fed directly to the projector for 3D viewing. 'Although to be honest, to date I have been totally underwhelmed by the experience – I prefer good old 2D and a dose of imagination!'

Gary has wired the room for 7.1 sound, but says that due to the limited space available he's happy with the 5.1 setup he currently has, using Bowers & Wilkins speakers and the aforementioned REL. A pair of B&W 685s handle the left and right channels; an HTM61 centre speaker delivers dialogue. DS6 dipoles are used for the surrounds, set into the walls. 'We were originally demoed the B&W/REL combination by Phase 3 Hi-Fi in Southampton and after it moved Pauline to tears I had to have it!' says Gary. 'To my ears it all works beautifully together to create a really immersive soundscape.'

Keeping the Panasonic Blu-ray player company is a venerable Pioneer BDP-LX71. 'I just can't bear to take it out as, although the Blu-ray laser appears to have gone west, it still spins and makes the most of any DVDs and

CDs I want to play.' Both these decks are run through an Onkyo TX-SR606 receiver.

With the room complete, Gary tells us it is used regularly for film and TV viewing, or just to chill out in. 'We frequently have friends round who all seem to find the experience preferable to the local fleapits. My youngest son Kieran even believes the sound and picture is better than the local cinema – and, of course we have the added advantage of being able to pause the film at will for refreshments.' A favourite demo sequence is the train crash from *Super 8*: 'This gives the REL Sub an opportunity to really do its stuff'

And are there any future additions planned? 'Well, a lady selling ice creams might be nice – otherwise it could be something as boring as some form of air conditioning to help keep the room cool when it's full of cinemagoers' ■

### BE IN HCC!

**EMAIL US:** If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself) to [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com) with the subject heading 'AV-Holic' – and please include a contact telephone number.

# Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

## Projection is the only way, Pt 1

As a film collector still capable of showing reel to reel, I have always felt it essential to have a dedicated viewing room and this extends to digital projection. My nine-year-old Pro JVC HD2 projector has been capable of screening all kinds of material in a cinematic way with very accurate colour presentation, and has satisfied both myself and colleagues from the film industry.

To try and watch film on anything other than a big screen in a darkened room is to deny the objective of film presentation. I therefore find Richard Stevenson's dilemma about buying a projector or a TV (Point of View, *HCC* #223) irrational if you want to successfully watch



film in the way that it was designed to be viewed.  
*Colin Clarke, via email*

**Richard Stevenson replies:**  
Thanks for the letter, Colin. I feel

your point of view is one shared by many *HCC* readers and film enthusiasts – after all, replicating the cinema experience at home would immediately suggest a bigscreen

in a darkened room. My point was that projection systems aren't suitable for everyone, and that increasingly large LED screens could provide a more convenient (and perhaps cost effective) solution. Some people don't have the space or the money for the dedicated viewing room that you enjoy – ultra large screens at least provide a step-up in cinematic feel but can still be installed in a room that's also used for other purposes. As long as everyone else in the house can get used to the monster display, of course...

## Projection is the only way, Pt 2

Okay, so TVs don't need a completely dark environment for the best performance – but do

## ★ STAR LETTER...

### Bigscreen sport is becoming a game of two halves!

I'm a film fanatic and watch Blu-rays on my home cinema setup practically every week, however I also enjoy watching sporting events on my 60in Panasonic plasma, and I'm worried that this is going to become problematic in the future.

As I understand it Premier League football from August will be broadcast as usual on Sky, but BT Vision has acquired the rights to a certain amount of matches. But I've also received a letter from Sky informing me that my subscription to the ESPN sports channels is ending. A search online revealed these are moving over to BT Vision too. As a Sky broadband, TV and phone customer, I have no desire to switch to BT Vision. Nor do I want to end up with two broadband accounts. Can I get the BT channels on my Sky package without changing any kit or subscription?

Furthermore, I know that people say that competition and choice is important, but it would make it easier for the consumer if our favourite sports were all broadcast from the same provider.

*Kris, via email*

**Mark Craven replies:** The new BT Sports channels will broadcast 38 Barclays Premier League games for the 2013/14 season, including '18 top picks'. They'll also be showing FA Cup and Europa League matches, plus rugby, Moto GP, WTA tennis and more. And yes, some of this is due to the acquisition of the ESPN channels.

BT has obviously spent a lot of money to acquire these rights, as it seeks to tempt Sky and Virgin Media subscribers to switch allegiance. It's caused a bit of a rumpus, too, with BT recently appealing to Ofcom when Sky refused to broadcast adverts for the new BT Sport channels.

While existing BT TV and Infinity subscribers get these channels for free, Sky stalwarts like yourself are still catered for, although you'll need to pay a fee of £12 per

month (plus a £15 activation payment). Check out channel 413 on your Sky box, which you might have noticed is now labelled BT Sport, for a rolling advert with the necessary info. If that fee is too much for you, you could consider switching from Sky broadband to BT – or just making do with Sky's plethora of sports channels.

As for having all sports available from one provider – well, that would be great if it was free. However, while Sky undoubtedly provides a great service, other broadcasters must be allowed to challenge them. As you say, competition and choice is important!

Star letter-writer Kris wins a copy of *Jack the Giant Slayer* on Blu-ray™. Directed by Bryan Singer and starring Nicholas Hoult, this epic fantasy adventure is available on digital download and to own on 3D Blu-ray™, Blu-ray™ and DVD with UltraViolet™ now.





we really want to spend time watching movies on a hot Summer evening? Secondly, projector noise on most models is not an issue unless it's placed above your head or next to your ears with the PJ on high brightness mode. Thirdly, affordable bulbs with a warranty can be bought from internet sellers, and unless you watch 'EastEnders or BBC news' on your PJ they'll last a long time. Lastly, are the Sony, Panasonic and JVC models with price tags from around £2,600 not decent enough? Is there really a need to add £2,000 to a £3,000 PJ?

LCD TVs – and especially LED sets – have bad motion handling and colours, and contrast may be good for TV shows but not movies. Movies don't look like movies on most of them. My conclusion is keep TVs for watching television, and simulation of cinema at home – 80in and more – should be with the projector only!

*Romualds Pizans, via email*

Anton van Beek replies: Right, that's another one for the 'projection is best' camp. Should we have Richard Stevenson tarred and feathered, or does anyone else see the attraction of a super-size TV in place of a projector and screen?

And just because the long, warm evenings are finally upon us that's no excuse to stop watching movies...

### I love buying Blu-rays!

Regarding Mark Craven's column in HCC #223, it's good to see someone who has not got his head in the Cloud. We rent and buy films; the buying and owning experience is still great. It's good to touch the case and read the notes. The acquisition experience and the ability to take off the shelf and view at any time is still compelling. We don't want UltraViolet!

*Ted, via email*

Mark Craven replies: 'We don't want UltraViolet!' Succinctly put Ted. We agree with you that owning Blu-rays provides a joyous, tangible experience. It is, however, something that a



↳ IsoTek's Genesis ultra high-end power conditioner retails for around £13,000

lot of other people just don't get. I have plenty of discs on shelves that are probably never going to be watched again – and some that haven't even been watched once. Would I want to archive them digitally or throw them away? No. Because one day I may finally get the urge to watch *Snakes on a Train* (think *Snakes on a Plane* but without the sense of humour. Or the thrills). If it was stored in the Cloud I'd probably forget I owned it.

### The mains question

The wife's DIY has finished and now I have some time to do the real work – home cinema!

I've been reading your magazine for sometime, following the changing technology, and looking at those wonderful cinema rooms. I've noticed that a lot come with power conditioners and surge protectors. Is this mainly for the cr\*\*py American electricity or should we be doing this as well? Is it a sales gimmick? I don't remember you covering this topic and you don't really see then in the shops.

*Wilf Welch, via email*

Mark Craven replies: Mains/power conditioners aren't only found in the rarefied realms of high-end installations – you can buy them from the likes of

Maplin for as little as £40. The basic premise is that they filter out unwanted 'noise' lurking on your mains ring, thus providing your AV equipment with 'cleaner' power. This in turn, could improve performance. However, as is the same with cabling, there's a raging debate going on amongst AV-hedz as to the real benefits.

A good idea would be to get a mains conditioner from a retailer that offers a money-back trial period, so you can see and hear for yourself whether it makes a difference to your setup. Alternatively, invest in a 'noise sniffer', which can detect whether you have large amounts of interference in the first place.

A surge protector will lessen the affect on performance of random voltage spikes. Do note, however, that it will not safeguard your AV gear in the result of a direct lightning strike.

The key question is whether you can afford a power conditioner/surge protector. Many people enjoy their home cinema without them. If you're run out of other hardware to buy, though, it's worth considering.

### A small suggestion

Hi. Please could you add what back issues the products in your Buyer's Guide were first featured

in? I have two years worth of flick through! Am sure it would be most helpful for your readers.

*Dean Smith, Surrey*

Anton van Beek replies: That's a very sensible idea Dean, and something we probably should have done ages ago. As of the next issue, we will be doing exactly that.

### Buying without trying

Hi. To answer your question (HCC #220), yes, I have bought a projector without viewing it first. I based my purchase on your magazine's review.

*M. Smith, via email*

Mark Craven replies: Well, we hope you're enjoying owning it (you don't say what model it is). We'd still be surprised if anyone has ever bought speakers without actually listening to them first – with the exception

### CONTACT US...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, BR6 6BG, or email us at [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

of the direct sales brands, of course.

### D-VHS was a delight

I read the article about D-VHS in the latest issue and wanted to write in and share my experience. As someone who only subscribed to Sky quite recently (2009) and only got a Freeview HD PVR in 2007 I was happily using VHS to record TV programmes for many years. I did at one point own a DVD recorder but found the system of formatting discs, etc, to be more complicated than simply recording to a tape (although I did use the recorder – a Panasonic model – as my DVD player).

I moved from a regular VHS recorder to a JVC D-VHS machine and absolutely loved it. Being able to record up to seven hours at high quality was fantastic – it looked so much better than

anything else at the time. In that aspect I found it a great format, even though as you say it failed to live up to its potential.

The deck has long since been removed from my kit rack, but I'm pretty sure it's still in my loft. I'm tempted to plug it in again and see if the quality still shines through!  
*Brian, Chester*

**Mark Craven replies:** The loft – otherwise known as the AV graveyard. I'll be honest and say that I keep a tight ship where my hardware is concerned. If you're not being used, then out you go.

**We'd be interested to see who has the oldest piece of kit still being employed in their setup.**

### You forgot Kubrick

How could you ignore *2001: A Space Odyssey* in your selection of jaw-dropping movie moments in the last issue? The special effects were at the time beyond anything previously achieved and the first time I saw it I was astonished. Other classic movies that are worthy of consideration are *Apocalypse Now* (and the helicopter gunship sequence) and *The Wizard of Oz*, for its dramatic switch from black-and-white to

**D-VHS: is there a player lurking in your loft?**

colour. Cinema has been going for longer than 20 years, don't forget!  
*Peter Melton, via email*

**Anton van Beek replies:** Actually, *2001...* almost made it into our list, as did many other movies – we chose the ones that stuck out most clearly in our minds from a variety of genres, and for different reasons. *Jason and the Argonauts* was our most vintage selection, and both *American Werewolf...* and *The Thing* are over 30 years old ■



## Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to [Competitions@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:Competitions@homecinemachoice.com) to be in with a chance



### Dressed to Kill

Brian De Palma's controversial 1980 thriller starring Michael Caine and Nancy Allen has been given a lavish, feature-packed Blu-ray release by Arrow Video,

and finally arrives in the UK uncut. It's available to buy from July 29, but we've got five copies to give away.

#### Question:

Which De Palma movie starred Al Pacino?

#### Answer:

- A)** Carlito's Way **B)** Blow Out  
**C)** Mission: Impossible

Email your answer with **'Dressed'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



### Spring Breakers

Available from August 12 on Blu-ray or DVD

(and digital download from July 29) from Universal Pictures, *Spring Breakers* is a stylish thriller from *Kids* director Harmony Korine. We have three Blu-rays and copies of the CD soundtrack to dish out to lucky readers.

#### Question:

*Spring Breakers* star James Franco also appeared in which Danny Boyle movie?

#### Answer:

- A)** 28 Days Later **B)** 127 Hours **C)** Trainspotting  
Email your answer with **'Spring'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



### Stolen

This hi-octane actioner re-teams star Nicholas Cage (as a frantic father given 12 hours to find a \$10m ransom) with *Con Air* director Simon West. *Stolen* is out on Blu-ray

and DVD on August 5, courtesy of Lions Gate Home Entertainment, but we've nabbed five copies to give away.

#### Question:

*Stolen* director Simon West also helmed which of the following movies?

#### Answer:

- A)** Die Hard 2 **B)** The Expendables 2  
**C)** Lethal Weapon 2

Email your answer with **'Stolen'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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# HEADING INTO Oblivion

We chat to *Oblivion* director **Joseph Kosinski** about his return to the sci-fi genre, working with Tom Cruise and the difficulties posed by refusing to shoot on green screen...

**JOSEPH KOSINSKI'S STAR** is rapidly on the rise. A former architecture student and commercials director, he shot to fame thanks to his groundbreaking 2010 movie debut *Tron: Legacy*, which mixed state-of-the-art special effects with astonishing cinematography and showed a keen appreciation of the sci-fi genre. His follow-up feature, *Oblivion*, available on Blu-ray from August 19, promises more of the same.

## How did the idea for *Oblivion* first come about?

'It sprouted out of my brain about eight years ago! I had just moved to Los Angeles and was not having any luck getting work in commercials or music videos, which is kind of what I went out there for. So to keep myself from going crazy, I started writing this short story that I thought maybe could be a great first film; a small, contained, character-driven story.

'I loved *Twilight Zone* as a kid, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, obviously *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I grew up watching all these TV shows and movies, but I wanted to do something different than anything else out there. I wanted to make a daylight science-fiction film about the last man on Earth.'

## What's the attraction of sci-fi?

'I went to Petra, in Jordan, a couple of years ago and you look at this city carved into the sand that is empty now. There is something profound in thinking about a time where our world will be the ruins of the future. Our civilisation will be something that people will study. In that sense sci-fi can be very emotional, especially in that kind of realistic sci-fi – something that looks into a future that could exist.'

'*Oblivion* is a universal story. It takes place in the future but I would not call it hardcore sci-fi. It's about a man discovering something inside himself, becoming a hero... about the endurance of true love. It is about what it is that makes us who we are.

'It has some very universal themes. It just happens to take place on a future Earth...'

## How did you develop the story into a film?

'Just after I had written the treatment, the Writers' Guild went on strike. So I had a story I wanted to

develop but no one to work with. My agent had the idea that we should develop it as a graphic novel until the strike was over and then at least we would have some imagery and more story fleshed out. While I was doing that, I got diverted onto *Tron: Legacy* for three years. I went off and made that movie. When I came back I had a big book of imagery and a really strong sense of the story. I went out to the studios with a pitch and then Tom Cruise got wind of it. I pitched him the story, he jumped on, and we were off to the races.'

## Movie stars don't get much bigger than Cruise...

'He's amazing. He is the hardest-working person I have ever met; committed to doing good work every single day. He has also worked with a lot of my heroes, from Stanley Kubrick (*Eyes Wide Shut*) to Ridley Scott (*Legend*) and Michael Mann (*Collateral*). This being my second movie, I learned a lot from him and from his past experience.'

## Speaking of past experiences: what did you learn from *Tron: Legacy* that you applied here?

'A lot of things. *Tron...* was an amazing experience, just working on a movie of that scale, the technical side of it, the process. In terms of the script, though, this time I knew I wanted it to be completely finished before we started shooting. With *Tron...* we didn't have that luxury; *Tron...* was kind of a work-in-progress the whole time and that makes an already difficult process that much harder. The standard I had for the script was very high this time around. We had a script that we locked before we started shooting and it is the story that is onscreen today.'

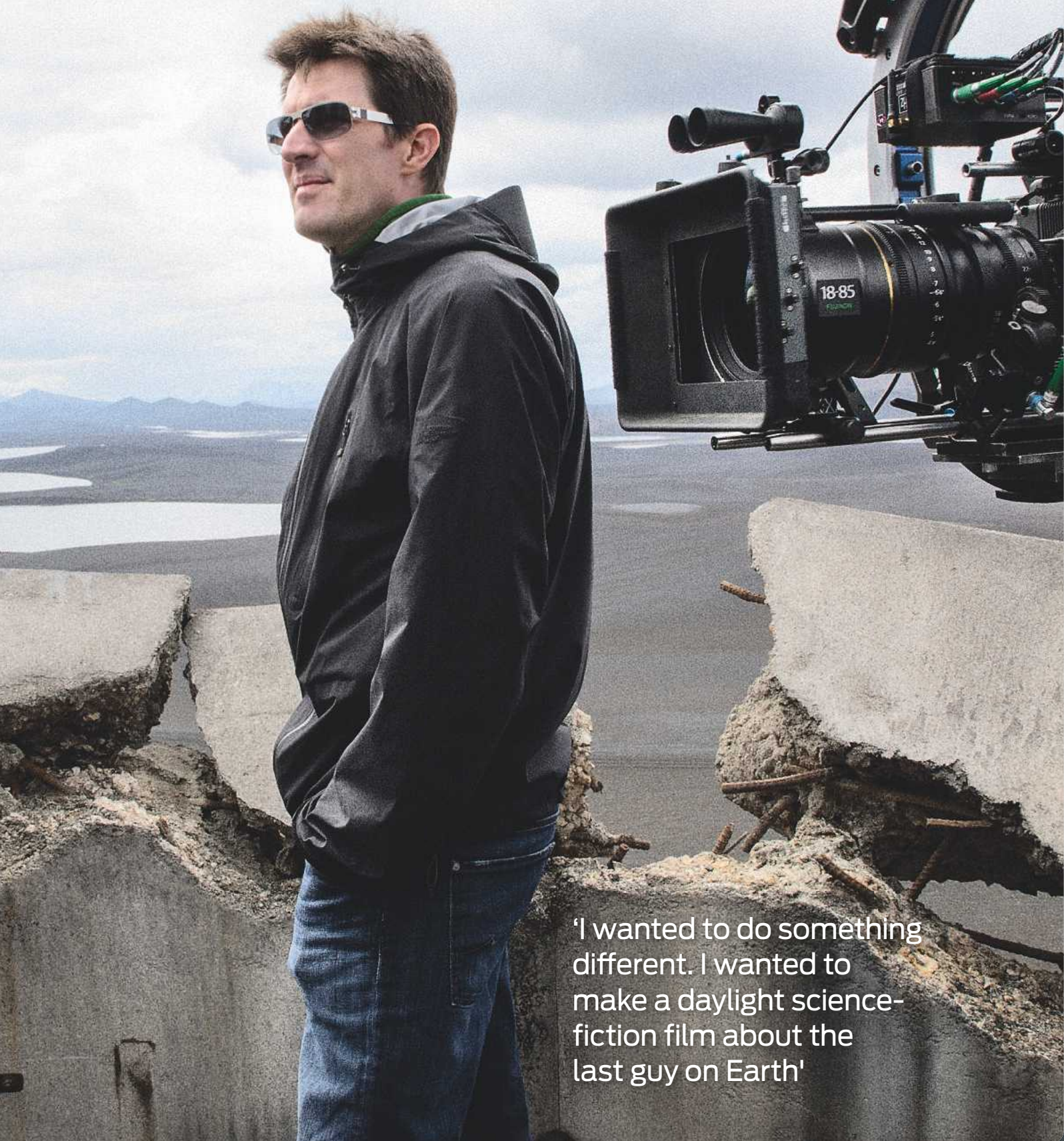
## Does *Oblivion* push the technology envelope in any way?

'Absolutely, but we did it in a way that is kind of old school. We pushed the technology by not using green screen and blue screen as it has been





Joseph Kosinski filmed *Oblivion* on location in Iceland, Hawaii and the US



'I wanted to do something different. I wanted to make a daylight science-fiction film about the last guy on Earth'



## GO FOR A CRUISE

Our pick of the best Tom Cruise Blu-rays

### Minority Report



Originally scripted as a sequel to *Total Recall*, by the time it hit cinemas in 2002 *Minority Report* had morphed into a dark, intricate sci-fi tale, with Cruise's PreCrime officer on the run from his superiors for a murder that – you guessed it – he didn't commit.

### Collateral

Cruise plays against type as a ruthless hitman in Michael Mann's stylish LA-set thriller, which is also notable for its pioneering use of digital HD cameras and an uncredited cameo from Jason Statham in his *Transporter* suit...

### Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol



More proof that sequels can be better than their predecessors, *M:I IV* cranks up the action and stuntwork of the previous trilogy to astonishing effect – and the Dolby TrueHD 7.1 mix on Paramount Pictures' Blu-ray is reference-grade.

### Jack Reacher

Ignore the fanboys that say Cruise is too short to play the hero of Lee Child's series of novels and instead revel in this slick, engaging thriller. The Blu-ray's a cracker too – roll on the sequel...

### Legend

While it split critics and audiences, this remains indispensable viewing – if only to see Ridley Scott's take on the fantasy genre. Grab Universal's Ultimate Edition to check out the longer Director's Cut, plus tons of extras.

traditionally used. This is a movie where I was adamant about capturing as much of it in-camera as possible.

'The sky tower for instance, the house that Jack [Tom Cruise's character] lives in. Traditionally you would build a stage, surround it with green screen, shoot the action and then afterwards fill in the backgrounds with the skies outside. On this movie, we did it differently. We went up to the top of Haleakala Volcano in Maui for a week and shot sky plates with three cameras strapped together so that we had ultra high-resolution panoramas of clouds at ten thousand feet. We then took that footage and projected it with 21 projectors onto a massive 360-screen around the set. Using the cameras we have – brand-new cameras, the Sony F-65 with Master Prime lenses – this projection technique, we were then able to capture all those sky tower scenes in-camera. So the actors on set are looking out at clouds blowing by the windows. That light is actually lighting them as it would as if it were really built. None of that is visual effects.'

### Where were those sequences filmed?

'That soundstage was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Celtic Studios. We had a massive stage, 70-feet high, with this thing built and running. At the push of a button, I could pick between eight different weather patterns. I could shoot night, all day. I could shoot dawn, all day. All that stuff you could never do with visual effects. So that, with my now Oscar-winning

**'I knew I wanted *Oblivion* to be completely finished before we started shooting. With *Tron...* we didn't have that luxury'**

cinematographer, Claudio Miranda (*Life of Pi*), was the system we worked out. I am most proud of that, because that was the dream from beginning.'

### And what about the film's amazing exteriors?

'They were shot in Iceland, which has a very primordial feel. It feels like the Earth of millions of years ago; the entire black desert, all the glaciers – everything was shot in Iceland.'

### You have a background in architecture – does that come into play into your filmmaking?

'The obvious ways are in the production design side of it. I love digging into the details and making sure that everything feels functional and real and does not just feel like a movie prop. On a more conceptual level, I also think there are a lot of similarities between architecture and filmmaking. In architecture school I learned how a unifying idea can influence everything from the big decisions to the details. Also as an architect you may be the visionary, but you are working with many, many people to actually realise it at the end of the day. An architect does not build his



Tom Cruise roams the Earth as drone repairman Jack Harper

own buildings a brick at a time – directing is very much the same way.'

### How important is the science part of your science fiction?

'A lot. The first thing I did on this movie, which I did on *Tron...* as well, was assemble a group of about twelve scientists from JPL [NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory]. I asked them questions. If we had contact with another intelligent race, why would they come here? What would they want from us and what would that be like? If you were going to attack Earth, what would be the best way to do it? The destruction of the moon, it turns out, is actually a very sophisticated way to throw Earth into chaos. All these ideas that I had in the treatment, we were able to kind of get some scientific foundation for.'

### So the technologies depicted are based on real science?

'Propulsion systems, power systems of the future, the use of clean fusion and heavy hydrogen and deuterium energy which exists in the sea water... that kind of technology will exist. Just the notion of all the energy that exists in our ocean, sitting right there, is a very fascinating thing.'

### Finally, has anything been kept in reserve from the original story for a potential sequel?

'No, I feel this is a very complete story. I had not really thought about a sequel. I feel like it has a beginning, middle and an end, and it is satisfying. That does not mean we could not come up with an earlier chapter or a later chapter to continue the story... But for now, for me, it feels like it is a great stand-alone film.' ■

***Oblivion* is available to buy on Blu-ray from August 19, courtesy of Universal Pictures. Bonus features include deleted scenes, a Making of... doc and chat track with Tom Cruise and Joseph Kosinski**







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# PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **HANSEL & GRETEL: WITCH HUNTERS 3D** Stereoscopic fairy tale is definitely not for the kids **DARK SKIES** Aliens are invading your home cinema room **STOKER** Hitchcockian thriller serves up some major chills in hi-def **BREAKING BAD** Hit US drama finally goes Blu **DRESSED TO KILL** De Palma's controversial slasher is released uncut **AND MUCH MORE!**

## Could it be magic?

Oz the Great and Powerful 3D → Walt Disney Home Entertainment → All-region BD

Sam Raimi whisks us back to the world of Oz with this stereoscopic prequel to one of the best-loved movies ever made. Turn to p98 to discover whether this blockbuster fantasy flick delivers a magical home cinema experience...

### HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



'That Hansel's so hot right now...'



# Grimm fairy tale goes all goofy

Gore and gags are the order of the day in this deliciously daft revisionist take on the classic story

## → HANSEL & GRETEL: WITCH HUNTERS 3D



### HCC VERDICT

**Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters 3D**  
→ Paramount → All-region BD  
→ £25 Approx

**WE SAY:** This goofy and gory fantasy flick delivers a strong AV performance. Shame about the extras, though

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

Following in the footsteps of *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* offers a more action-packed update of a classic fairy tale. Thankfully, as you might expect from the young director who gave us 2009's gonzo Nazi zombie flick *Dead Snow*, this retooling of The Brothers Grimm's story is far less po-faced than its forgettable predecessors.

Jeremy Renner and Gemma Arterton star as the siblings who, after running afoul of a witch as children, now dedicate their lives to dressing in leather and hunting down witches with the aid of anachronistic weaponry such as automatic crossbows and a hand-cranked Gatling gun.

It is, of course, completely stupid. But luckily we're talking about *Army of Darkness* levels of stupidity here, rather than *Van Helsing*.

Renner and Arterton are clearly having plenty of fun goofing around and playing with all of the weapons, while Famke Janssen gets to ham it up to the high heavens as the film's big bad witch. Meanwhile, director Tommy Wirkola stages some impressive action scenes and keeps his tongue wedged firmly in his cheek, ensuring that the film's lashings of gore simply add to its madcap sense of fun, rather than feeling particularly grisly.

**Picture:** This set offers separate platters for the 2D and 3D versions – and in terms of technical quality both hold up well. Details and intricate textures are

evident throughout the 'flat' AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and its stereoscopic MVC incarnation, as are very strong black levels and a warm colour palette.

If we have one complaint, it's that the 3D version is lacking in overall impact. There are some nifty examples of negative parallax, with a variety of weapons and exploding body parts flying out of the screen, and the 3D does give a slightly greater sense of space to some of the exterior settings. However, there's little here to make it really stand out from the film's 2D incarnation.

**Audio:** *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunter's* Dolby TrueHD 5.1 soundtrack is every bit as big, brash and bold as you'd expect. Foley effects are spread all around the soundfield and pan rapidly from speaker to speaker, dialogue is giving plenty of weight and space and there's plenty of bass to back up the action. Not subtle, but highly enjoyable.

**Extras:** The 3D platter is devoid of extras and only features the original cinema cut of the film. Meanwhile the set's 2D disc serves up a 10-minute longer extended cut of the film, plus a trio of brief behind-the-scenes featurettes.





## Flight

Paramount → All-region BD  
£20 Approx



Another powerhouse performance by Denzel Washington elevates this predictable drama about an alcoholic air

pilot who saves a plane from crashing by pulling off the kind of crazy manoeuvre that only a drunk could think up. While the AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals are sensational, the disc's DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is curiously understated – especially during the crash sequence. It may be that the filmmakers wanted to go for realism in the scene, but it's hard not to hope for something a little more powerful. Three featurettes and a Q&A with the cast (minus an ill Denzel Washington) and crew are the only extras.



## Hitchcock

20th Century Fox → All-region BD  
£20 Approx



Loosely based on Stephen Revell's book *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, this film excels at recreating

period details, but struggles to find any drama in the true story. This is no doubt why the writers cooked up a pointless plot about Hitch (Anthony Hopkins) being haunted by both the spectre of Ed Gein and a suspicion that his wife Alma (Helen Mirren) is having an affair. The fantastic AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and sizeable batch of extra features do at least ensure that it's a decent Blu-ray package. And if nothing else, it's sure to leave you wanting to watch *Psycho* all over again.



## Side Effects

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD  
£20 Approx



Stephen Soderbergh's cinematic swan song is a curious beast. What looks at first to be a

timely drama about medical ethics and prescription drugs suddenly changes tack and transforms into the kind of fun-but-dumb thriller you'd expect to have seen Richard Gere and Kim Basinger topline in the 1990s. This BD's AVC 1.78:1 1080p imagery looks entirely true to source (awash with the kind of sickly green and yellow palette the filmmaker favoured recently) and is joined by a suitably restrained DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. Extras include interviews, promo featurettes and fake drug commercials.



## WE ASKED...

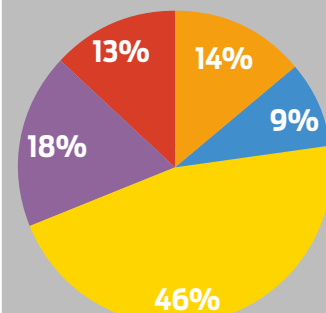
How many Blu-rays and DVDs do you own?

0-50 51-100

101-500

501-1000

So many that I've lost count



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# Close encounters of the dull kind

Sci-fi and horror fans should keep watching the skies as there's nothing to see here

## → DARK SKIES

A ordinary American family with money troubles. Strange noises at night. A young child talking to someone nobody else can see. Animals acting weird. Half-glimpses of shadowy figures that disappear when the lights are turned on. Alarms being tripped despite the fact that all of the doors and windows are still locked.

As you can probably guess from the above, the biggest problem with *Dark Skies* is that it doesn't really have an original idea to call its own. Instead, it's little more than a collection of concepts and scenes we've already experienced over and over again in horror films from *Poltergeist* to *Insidious*. The only difference is that this time around they're being pressed into the service of a tale of alien abduction – and not a particularly scary one at that.

**Picture:** *Dark Skies* splits its time pretty evenly between brightly-lit suburban exteriors and shadowy night interiors. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode on EntertainmentOne's Blu-ray release handles both equally well.

During the daylight scenes, splashes of colour look bold and inviting and detailing is fine enough to pick out individual blades of grass in the perfectly manicured lawns. When darkness falls the excellent black levels and contrast come into their own, filling the screen with bold shadows without compromising on the overall clarity and sharpness.

**Audio:** This Blu-ray beams down with a well-balanced DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix that specialises in deep, foreboding bass effects. Dialogue is also very cleanly rendered, even during the noisiest



Keri Russell can work wonders with empty bottles and sticky-back plastic

## HCC VERDICT

### Dark Skies

→ EntertainmentOne → Region B BD  
→ £20 Approx

**WE SAY:** All traces of originality have been abducted from this predictable and bland alien thriller

Movie ★★☆☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆☆

Overall ★★☆☆☆☆

moments. The only downside is that there are so many scenes where so little happens that the surround speakers really don't get the chance to shine like you might hope – a real pity considering how effective the directional effects are when things finally reach a head in the film's finale.

**Extras:** We can only presume that aliens have abducted most of the bonus features made to support this film, as this Blu-ray release really doesn't have too much on offer.

Writer/director Scott Stewart, producer Jason Blum, executive producer Brian Kavanaugh-Jones and editor Peter Gvozdas provide a fairly interesting commentary track that touches on all of the usual production details while also throwing up some intriguing anecdotes (such as the fact that the film was originally planned to be yet another entry in the 'found footage' genre). Also on offer are 11 deleted scenes, including an alternate ending.





# We're off to see the wizard

Sam Raimi's epic fantasy prequel sets a new benchmark for 3D Blu-ray



DEMO SCREEN...

Oz the Great and Powerful 3D

Time code: 017.47 – 023.41



**Twister trouble:** It may be lacking in colour, but the black-and-white twister sequence packs in plenty of eye-popping 3D thrills as shards of wood and other shrapnel flies around.



**Sky-high delights:** It's not too long before the image opens up into its true widescreen glory, filling the screen with rich vibrant colours as the hot air balloon floats gently above the land of Oz...



**Water way to go:** The action picks up again with the balloon basket riding the rapids after splashing down in a river. The steering present in the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix here is remarkable.



**Magic moments:** As Oscar Diggs' wild ride comes to an end, you can really appreciate the film's beautifully-hued colour palette and the sheer musical tonality of sound design.



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Which witch is which? Mila Kunis and Rachel Weisz play magical sisters

## → OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL 3D

Given the reverence so many fans have for the legendary 1939 MGM musical, it's no surprise that some consider any plans to do a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* to be completely sacrilegious.

But somehow writer Michael Kapner and director Sam Raimi have managed to magic up a dizzying and manically inventive fantasy film that feels like a natural part of the universe Frank L. Baum created. By exploring the origin of the Wizard, this blockbuster prequel feels fresh and unpredictable, whilst also delivering plenty of nods and winks for fans of the original film (and Baum's books).

Buoyed by game performances from all the principals and Raimi's energetic direction, *Oz the Great and Powerful* is a fun slice of fantastical whimsy wrapped up in dazzling layers of 3D eye-candy. So, even if it doesn't really measure up to the original, it's still a whole lot of fun.

**Picture:** Step aside *Avatar*, there's a new king of 3D Blu-ray. Disney's MVC-encoded stereoscopic presentation of *Oz the Great and Powerful* not only sets a new technical benchmark for the format – the native 3D photography is so involving that it makes the film even more enjoyable than the 'flat' version.

The sheer depth of the image and the volumetric dimensionality of everything inhabiting it is frankly awe-inspiring. Nothing about it feels forced or hokey (not even the odd out-of-the-screen moment such as the lion in Chapter 13); it just feels perfectly natural.

Colour presentation is undoubtedly the most vibrant we've seen in a 3D presentation and fills the widescreen 2.40:1 at all times (at least it does from Chapter 8 when the action moves to Oz – prior to that it's 1.33:1 black-and-white).

The 2D AVC 2.40:1 1080p is equally impressive, with no trace of colour banding, macroblocking, compression artefacts or edge enhancement.

So, while we think the film itself works better in its stereoscopic guise, whatever your video preference, Oz...s HD imagery is truly magical.

**Audio:** Both the 2D and 3D presentations of the film are accompanied by what Disney is openly touting as a 'near-field' DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack. This indicates that the mix has been optimised for 'smaller' environments – but don't worry, this is something that Disney has apparently done with a lot of its mixes in the past (albeit without the labelling) and as it happens, *Oz the Great and Powerful's* 7.1-channel soundtrack is a match for the reference-quality visuals.

Admittedly, things start in a rather subdued mode, with the audio accompanying the monochrome opening being deliberately wedded to the front stereo spread.

However, once our hero is sucked up by the tornado in Chapter 7 the full 7.1 mix explodes into life. Front and rear speakers are employed aggressively and consistently from that point onwards, building layer upon layer of audio in the soundfield to dynamic effect. And it's all ably supported by the authoritative presence of the track's LFE channel.

**Extras:** Oddly, when *Oz the Great and Powerful* was released on Blu-ray in the US, consumers were only given the chance of buying separate 2D and 3D versions – there was no set containing both Blu-rays (although each did ship with a redemption code allowing owners of one to buy the other for just \$5.99).

Thankfully, here in the UK Disney has stuck with its traditional release strategy and the 3D Blu-ray release comes with a copy of the 2D disc packed-in. Which is a good thing too, as that's the only one of the two platters to offer anything in the way of bonus material.

*Walt Disney and the Road to Oz* (10 minutes) is a fascinating account of the filmmaker's love of the Oz books and his many attempts to get a film adaptation off the ground over the years – including a horrible-looking TV movie featuring the Mouseketeers that was thankfully scrapped.

*"My Journey in Oz" by James Franco* (22 minutes) finds the actor armed with a video camera and interviewing the principal cast and crew, as well as going behind-the-scenes to see how the movie was made. Franco is as much fun off-screen as he is on and has a great rapport with the rest of the team, making this a refreshing and informative spin on the usual Making of... documentary.

*China Girl: The Suspension of Disbelief* (five minutes), *Before Your Eyes: From Kansas to Oz* (11 minutes), *Mila's Metamorphosis* (eight minutes) and *Mr. Elfman's Musical Concoctions* (seven minutes) all focus on different aspects of the production – from visual effects and costumes to make-up and music – and are also well worth a shufti. Finally, there's a blooper reel (five minutes) featuring the usual mix of flubbed lines and mucking around.

### HCC VERDICT

#### Oz the Great and Powerful 3D

→ Walt Disney → All-region BD → £25 Approx  
**WE SAY:** Disney's entertaining fantasy film is not only much better in 3D, it also sets a new reference standard for the format

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The animated Blu-ray menus showcase some of Oz's stranger denizens





## ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

### Grid 2

Codemasters → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £40 Approx



Having already sewn up its domination of the serious simulation side of the racing genre with its Formula One games, Codemasters now sets about doing the same for the arcade-style racer with this long-awaited sequel to 2008's *Race Driver: Grid*.



While other developers look for ways to squeeze genuine social network functions into their titles, Codemasters simply uses the whole concept of social media as the backbone for *Grid 2*'s single-player mode. The more you race and the better you do, the more fans you get online. This acts like a currency opening up more races for you to compete in, while simultaneously attracting the attention of sponsors and car manufacturers.

Of course, all of this is pretty ancillary to what really matters – how *Grid 2* plays. The good news is that it handles like a dream. The vehicle models and controls feel absolutely perfect, reacting instantly to every move you make, while plenty of effort has also been put into the A.I. opposition, making them a joy to race against. It's also worth noting that *Grid 2* is one of the best-looking racers of this generation, thanks to its array of almost photorealistic cars and environments – not that you'll necessarily notice the latter outside of crashes, due to the astonishing speeds the game has you travelling at. Superb.



### Remember Me

Capcom → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £40 Approx



The year is 2084 and in the city of Neo-Paris more than 99 per cent of the population now uploads and shares its memories thanks to a brain implant called the Sensation Engine (Sensen). Given the device's other abilities to alter or remove memories altogether, its developer Memorize has been able to take control of the populace



and turn the city into a surveillance state under its strict control. Fighting against them is a small band of rebels known as Errorists, which is where you come into the picture...

This third-person action-adventure casts players in the role of Nilin,

an Errorist who escapes from Memorize's clutches after having most of her memories erased. Guided through the city by your mysterious saviour Edge, you must try to rediscover the missing fragments of your memory – which basically boils down to climbing around the Neo-Paris cityscape and getting involved in punch-ups with various enemies. From time to time you also get the chance to hack into opponents' memories and spool through them looking for glitches to exploit in order to change them. Elements like this, and the game's beautiful and distinctive visual style, go towards making amends for frustrating gameplay shortcomings such as the limited move-set and occasionally obtrusive camera placement. Not a flawless game then, but definitely a memorable one.



### A Field in England

4DVD → All-region BD  
£20 Approx



Four deserters from the English Civil War find themselves stuck in a field, doped up on magic mushrooms and coerced into helping a mystical Irishman find buried treasure in this brilliantly

bonkers flick from Ben (*Sightseers*) Wheatley. Shot in under a fortnight for just £300,000, this experimental film conjures up a stunning AVC 2.40:1 1080p black-and-white encode on Blu-ray. The disc also works its magic through extensive extras, including a chat-track, 12 featurettes and an interview with the director.



### The Place Beyond the Pines

StudioCanal → Region B BD  
£20 Approx



Ryan Gosling and Bradley Cooper star in this ambitious and carefully observed crime drama. While it touches on traditional genre tropes such as bank robberies, corrupt cops

and internal affairs investigations, it's mainly concerned with the theme of fatherhood. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode opts for a highly stylised aesthetic that mixes heavy grain with bold washes of colour, while the accompanying DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix adds plenty of ambience. A commentary and four extended/deleted scenes are among the disc's modest extras.



### Quest for Fire

Second Sight → Region B BD  
£20 Approx



Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1982 prehistoric yarn may get a little tiresome thanks to its non-stop arm-waving and grunting (courtesy of a 'special language' created by Anthony Burgess),

but this Blu-ray's appealing AVC 2.35:1 1080p encode certainly gets the best from the film's exotic scenery. Audio comes in LPCM 2.0 and DTS-HD MA 5.0 flavours, both of which sound fine – although the surround remix is a touch forced at times. A pair of fun commentaries headline the strong batch of extras.







India hated Uncle Charlie's Rhianna impression most of all

# The family that plays together...

Park Chan-wook's Hollywood thriller melds Hitchcock and horror to mesmerising effect



## → **STOKER**

Equal parts coming-of-age story, family melodrama, exploration of femininity and homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, the Hollywood debut of director Park

Chan-wook is just as unusual and twisted as his earlier Korean thrillers *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *OldBoy* and *Lady Vengeance*.

Following the death of her father on her 18th birthday, India Stoker (Mia Wasikowska) is surprised to meet uncle Charlie (Matthew Goode), her father's charismatic brother, whom she had never heard of before. And when the increasingly creepy Charlie moves in with India and her unstable mother Evie (Nicole Kidman) things start to get really weird...

**Picture:** 20th Century Fox's Blu-ray platter does a magnificent job of translating *Stoker's* 35mm photography to the digital realm. And given how important the film's visuals are to its success, that's no small thing.

From start to finish the AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode delivers an authentically film-like viewing experience. The stylised colour palette favours muted tones, but where necessary still allows vivid primary colours a level of saturation and brightness that ensures they pop out of the image – just check out the spray of bright red blood against the flowers in Chapter 27 for a prime example.

Black levels also impress, providing a suitably shadowy atmosphere while still holding onto plenty

of detail. Speaking of which, daylight scenes and close-ups are awash with intricate textures and detailing thanks to the overall clarity of the picture.

**Audio:** 'My ears hear what others cannot hear,' states India at the start of the film – and this seems to have acted as a cue for the sound designers to really cut loose when it comes to devising *Stoker's* surprisingly expansive DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack.

Whether it's the crisp patter of a spider's legs as it walks across a hardwood floor or the booming echo of voices as India ventures into a cellar, the audio is every bit as overwrought and carefully conceived as the images it accompanies. And these effects aren't just pinned to the front of the soundstage, either – the mix makes constant use of the surround speakers to create a hyper-real aural landscape for the characters to inhabit.

Add to that a plentiful supply of LFE and crystal-clear dialogue reproduction and you have a lossless 5.1 track that's extremely hard to fault.

**Extras:** The undoubted highlight of the extras package is *Stoker: A Filmmaker's Journey*. Running a little under half-an-hour, it's an engaging and thorough account of the film's development from script to screen.

Also included are three deleted scenes, a gallery of 135 on-set photographs by Mary Ellen Mark, a gallery of 31 photos depicting the Curzon Soho cinema redressed as 'the world of *Stoker*' for the film's premiere, five short promo featurettes, red carpet footage, a live performance of *Becomes the Color* by Emily Wells, five trailers and eight TV spots.

*Stoker* was written by *Prison Break* star Wentworth Miller under a pseudonym



## HCC VERDICT

**Stoker**  
→ 20th Century Fox → All-region BD  
→ £20 Approx  
**WE SAY:** Park Chan-wook's surreal and enigmatic movie delivers plenty of AV thrills on this hi-def platter

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

**Overall** ★★★★★



'You should really invest in a proper wallet'



# Being bad has never felt so good

Take a hit of these Blu-ray boxsets and you'll be hooked on the most addictive TV drama around

## → **BREAKING BAD: SEASONS 1-5**



### HCC VERDICT

#### Breaking Bad: Seasons 1-5

→ Sony Pictures → All-region BD (Seasons 1, 2, 3 and 5)/ Region A/B BD (Season 4) → £25-£35 Each

**WE SAY:** Unmissable TV drama given (mostly) five-star treatment on BD

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

When underachieving chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston) is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he comes up with an unusual plan to ensure that his family won't be left with crippling debt when he dies. Teaming up with former student Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), the duo start producing the purest crystal meth around.

It's a neat idea and one that employs a combination of smarts, humour and great acting to cook up a TV drama that is every bit as addictive as Walt's 'Blue Sky' narcotic.

**Picture:** All five seasons feature AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes for their episodes. For the most part they're pretty comparable, boasting a stability and clarity that helps highlight fine detailing, while colours are bold and the grain structure appears natural.

However, two of the seasons don't hold up quite so strongly. *Season One* looks far grittier and darker than those that followed, with modest textures and rather lifeless colours. Presumably this is due to the filming conditions during the first year of production, which were subsequently given a boost when *Breaking Bad* became a runaway success.

Rather more troubling is *Season Four*, which delivers the most hit-or-miss transfers

in the show's history. Sometimes it looks absolutely breathtaking, but at other times it's clear that noise-reduction technology has been applied with a rather heavy-hand. While this was presumably done to manage grain levels, it results in some sequences looking artificial.

**Audio:** Right from the start, *Breaking Bad* has delivered the goods when it comes to creating an immersive soundfield. Considering that so much of the show is simply people talking with (or shouting at) one another, the dynamics, directionality and bass present in the DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtracks here is nothing less than outstanding. Make no mistake about it: *Breaking Bad* is one of the best-sounding television series around.

**Extras:** These five Blu-ray boxsets come loaded with extras. There's far too much to list, but episode commentaries by the cast and crew, deleted/extended/alternate scenes, behind-the-scenes featurettes, spoof commercials and photo galleries are just the tip of the bonus feature iceberg.

However, there is a slight snag – and that's *Season Four*. For some reason, the UK release drops a number of extras that appeared on the US Blu-ray; namely all 13 episode commentaries, four featurettes and 13 video podcasts. UK fans still enjoy a healthy pile of goodies, but that doesn't make the omission of those other extras any less disappointing.





## The Fall

Acorn Media → All-region BD  
£25 Approx



This slow-burning BBC series proved a breath of fresh air amid the flashy *C.S.I.*-style cop shows that currently dominate TV schedules. An intelligent and disturbing thriller, it was a critical and ratings hit for the BBC thanks in no small part to the central performances from Jamie Dornan and Gillian Anderson. Acorn Media's two-disc HD release boasts crisply delineated AVC 1.78:1 1080i encodes that cope well with the gloomy photography, although the LPCM 2.0 audio is limited. A 12-minute *Making of...* photo gallery and cast profiles make for rather lacklustre extras. Great show, but a so-so Blu-ray.



## Dexter: The Seventh Season

Paramount → Region B BD  
£45 Approx



The sixth season of *Dexter* was a huge disappointment, but this penultimate batch of episodes finds it rebounding in style – largely down to the many shocks and surprises that arise out of Dexter's increasingly strained relationship with his sister Deb. This four-disc Blu-ray release is just as much of a killer as Dexter himself, courtesy of its razor-sharp AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes and proficient Dolby TrueHD 5.1 mixes. Extras include four short featurettes, a seven-part *Writers' Roundtable* and select scene commentary on the final episode.



## Boardwalk Empire: Season Three

HBO Home Entertainment  
→ All-region BD → £45 Approx



Gang war threatens Atlantic City as Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi) comes up against Sicilian mobster Gyp Rosetti (Bobby Cannavale) in the latest season of HBO's prohibition-era gangster series. This five-disc Blu-ray set maintains the high standards of its predecessors with flawless AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes and top-notch DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. Extras include an interview with producer Martin Scorsese, an interactive viewing mode (offering character/location info, plus additional video content) and six commentaries.



## Teen Wolf: Season Two

20th Century Fox → R2 DVD  
£30 Approx



It may be produced by MTV, but this cult show continues to punch well above its weight and deliver some of the best post-*Buffy* supernatural shenanigans on TV (it's also better than the 1985 Michael J. Fox film that it's based on). While a BD release still isn't on the cards, this DVD is a reasonable stand-in thanks to its well-rendered anamorphic 1.78:1 NTSC visuals and surprisingly effective DD5.1 audio. Extras include a trio of episode commentaries, deleted/alternate scenes, behind-the-scenes featurettes and the return of the *Shirtless Montage*...



# Back to the Futur(ama) at last!

Matt Groening's animated sci-fi sitcom makes a belated return to Blu-ray in the UK

## → FUTURAMA: THE COMPLETE SEASON 6

It's been 18 long months since the fifth season of sci-fi cartoon *Futurama* hit Blu-ray in the UK. During this time two further seasons have been released to buy in the US and the show has been cancelled all over again. But let's not dwell on the negatives. Instead, let's simply be happy that UK fans have another 13 episodes to enjoy in hi-def with this belated release of the show's sixth season.

While it may not shine quite as brightly as it did several seasons ago, *Futurama* still manages to entertain with the sheer weight of nerd humour and parody that it crams into every episode. Highlights this time out include Leela's obsessive hunt for a fourth-dimensional whale in *Möbius Dick*, Bender's ascension to Godhood in *Overclocked* and the crazy anthology episode *Reincarnation*, which re-imagines the show in the style of a 1920s Fleischer Studios 'toon, an 8-bit videogame and a Japanese anime.

**Picture:** The set's two BD50 platters serve up some gorgeous hi-def eye-candy. Blacks are rock solid, primary colours pop off the screen, edge lines are crisp (although a few jaggies can be found here and there if you look close enough) and there's not a trace of compression artefacting or banding to spoil your fun.

**Audio:** This latest volume of *Futurama* sounds very



much like its predecessors when it comes to the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. As such, use of the surrounds isn't necessarily as pronounced as you might hope, but there's some weight to the bass and dialogue is always crystal clear. Once again there are no technical issues to concern fans, either. **Extras:** Executive producers Matt Groening and David X. Cohen are joined by a rotating cast of animators, writers and directors on a collection of anecdote-packed audio commentaries for all 13 episodes. Also spread across the two discs are 25 deleted scenes.

*Professor Farnsworth's Science of a Scene* is a 17-minute look at the year-long process of bringing an episode to the screen. In the seven-minute *Reincarnation Explained!* director Peter Avanzino explores the three animation styles used in that episode. Finally, the 11-minute *Futurama F.A.Q.* sees some of the crew answering viewer's questions.



## HCC VERDICT

### Futurama: The Complete Season 6

→ 20th Century Fox  
→ All-region BD → £30 Approx  
**WE SAY:** It's great to see *Futurama* back on Blu-ray in the UK – even if this isn't the show's strongest season

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



# Arrow fashions another killer Blu-ray

De Palma's stylish and controversial erotic thriller is another feather in the label's cap

## → DRESSED TO KILL

Brian De Palma's 1980 thriller is the kind of utterly bonkers cinematic confection that only a truly gifted filmmaker could actually get away with. Angie Dickinson stars as a frustrated housewife whose casual afternoon liaison with a stranger ends in murder. What follows is a deranged spiral into sex, death and transgender issues, which mixes together the very best of Hitchcock and '70s Italian slashers to outrageous effect.

**Picture:** Derived from a 35mm interpositive and transferred to hi-def at the Post Group in Hollywood, this appears to be the same source material that MGM used for its 2011 US Blu-ray release. Not that this should give anyone cause for concern, as it's a very sympathetic treatment of the film.

The source print itself is in good shape, bright and colourful with only very infrequent marks and sparkles. The slight haziness the AVC 2.39:1 1080p image exhibits appears native to the source material. While this means that it isn't always the sharpest-looking film of this vintage – and therefore sometimes lacks a little refinement in its detailing – the grain structure isn't affected in any way.

**Audio:** Not only does this disc include the DTS-HD MA 5.1 remix that MGM produced for its US Blu-ray, but also an LPCM 2.0 presentation of the original mono track. Both are technically sound, with clear dialogue and excellent music presentation. The 5.1 mix obviously proves to be a more immersive affair



Eyebrow shaving was much more hazardous back in the 1980s



with its repositioning of ambient audio cues into the surround speakers, but purists will want to stick with the source-accurate dual mono alternative.

**Extras:** Carried over from the US release are a 44-minute *Making of...*; a comparison of the unrated, R-rated and TV cuts; a 10-min featurette about how the film was censored; a gallery of behind-the-scenes photos; and the trailer. On top of these you get lengthy new interviews with producer George Litto and actors Angie Dickinson, Nancy Allen and Keith Gordon taken from Carlotta Films' French Blu-ray. The accompanying booklet includes an essay on the film by critic Maitland McDonagh and an interview with poster designer Stephen Sayadian.

### HCC VERDICT

#### Dressed to Kill

→ Arrow Video → Region B BD  
→ £20 Approx

**WE SAY:** Arrow does De Palma's sleazy erotic thriller proud with this uncut, feature-packed Blu-ray outing

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

## Maniac

Metrodome → All-region BD  
£20 Approx



This remake of William Lustig's notorious 1980 slasher is sure to be remembered as one of the year's best genre films. Almost the entire movie plays out from the point-of-view of serial killer

Frank Zito (Elijah Wood) – a brave and uncompromising concept that combines with the smart script to force viewers to deal head-on with issues of voyeurism and misogyny. The Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode handles the film's stylish and colourful aesthetic extremely well, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is atmospheric and gets the best out of the film's synth score. The main extra is a 116-minute reel of press tour interviews.



## The Car

Arrow Video → Region B BD  
£20 Approx



A demonic car terrorises a small Utah town in this daft-but-fun chiller. While it may sound like a rip-off of Stephen

King's *Christine*, Elliot Silverstein's *The Car* actually hit cinemas in 1977 – six years prior to the publication of King's novel – and feels more akin to a mix of Spielberg's *Duel* and *Jaws* (although inferior to both). Arrow's AVC 2.35:1 1080p encode shows some sign of wear and tear but is much better than expected, while the LPCM 2.0 audio is as good as you could reasonably hope for. Modest extras include a couple of interviews and a rather awkward commentary from the director.



## The Man Who Haunted Himself

Network → Region B BD/R2 DVD  
£20 Approx



Network doesn't release too many films on Blu-ray – but when it does the results are usually worth the wait, and this underrated 1970 British thriller starring Roger Moore is a prime example. The 1.75:1-framed AVC encode and LPCM 2.0 mono soundtrack are both beautifully represented, supported by fantastic extras including a suite of nine pieces of music from the film's score, a quartet of photo, poster and storyboard galleries (containing more than 700 images between them) and a chat-track by Moore and writer Bryan Forbes.





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## HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

## TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Sony KDL-40W905A** → £1,400

★★★★★

Flaunting the brand's new Triluminos edge LED lighting, this 40in set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. The 'Sense of Quartz' styling is a winner, too. Pricey, but worth it

**Panasonic TX-P60ZT65** → £3,800 ★★★★★

This limited edition plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want 4K...

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows

**Samsung UE46F8000** → £1,800 ★★★★★

The F8000 tops Samsung's LED lineup (if you exclude the £35,000 S9 Ultra HD set) and is a consistently good performer. Bright, vivid images married to a super-stylish design

**LG 84LM960V** → £22,500 ★★★★★

LG's debut Ultra HD (4K) TV is an eye-opening look at the future of home cinema technology, with upscaled BDs benefitting from the pixel push. Hardly cheap, though

**Philips 55PFL6007** → £1,700 ★★★★★

Not one of Philips' top-flight models, but this Passive 3D bigscreen is superb value for money. Imagery is consistently good and the slim-bezel design works wonders with the 55in panel

**Panasonic TX-P65VT65** → £3,400 ★★★★★

A bigscreen plasma with a wonderfully sleek design, this Viera excels with sharp dynamic images, but requires some calibration to calm down its ramped up presets

**Philips 46PFL9707** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Philips' second iteration of its Moth Eye screen technology continues to offer astonishing contrast. This set is at its best with 2D HD material, though: crosstalk with 3D is apparent

**Panasonic TX-L47DT65** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The first of Panasonic's new 2013 LED TVs impresses with bright, sharp images and Passive 3D. Twin-tuner functionality is a welcome addition to the Smart revolution

**LG 50PA650T** → £500 ★★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for just £500 is hard to ignore, and LG's model rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart capabilities here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling

## TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



**Plasma or LCD?:** The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 70ins are also hitting the high street – and 84in 4K panels are also on the way. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and a higher energy consumption. There's also a more limited choice – with just Samsung, LG and Panasonic selling plasma TVs in the UK.



**Active or Passive:** At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set currently on sale.

## TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**Dracula**

This beautifully restored hi-def version of Hammer's 1958 classic finds the garlic-hater looking better than ever – and fang fans finally get to see footage cut by sensors that, until recently, was feared lost for good.

★★★★★

**Life of Pi**

No point beating around the bush – Fox's new Blu-ray is the best 3D disc we've come across, Ang Lee's spectacular visuals proving mindblowing. Thumping 7.1 audio and good extras complete a great package.

★★★★★

**Blow Out**

Brian de Palma's atmospheric and meticulously crafted thriller benefits from an HD restoration and a mountain of bonus material that will satiate fans. Be warned though: audio is LPCM stereo.

★★★★★

**Django Unchained**

Arguably Quentin Tarantino's best movie, and certainly his most gorgeous, *Django Unchained* arrives on BD with a breathtaking 2.40:1 transfer and robust 5.1 mix. Our only gripe is the pitiful extras.

★★★★★

**Zero Dark Thirty**

Kathryn Bigelow follows up *The Hurt Locker* with another slice of nail-biting military drama, this time based on the capture of Osama Bin Laden. Universal Pictures' Blu-ray looks, and sounds, great.

★★★★★



## Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★**  
 Oppo's first deck for two years has been worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs should you want to lavish some of its processing power on lesser components. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. All hail the the new king of Blu!
- 2**  **Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★**  
 This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling talents, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. Classy
- 3**  **Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★**  
 This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out
- 4**  **Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★**  
 Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs
- 5**  **Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★**  
 Currently the most affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer
- 6**  **Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★**  
 As a 'transport' rather than a player, this universal Denon lacks built-in decoders and analogue outputs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded
- 7**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★**  
 Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though
- 8**  **Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★**  
 Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though
- 9**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★**  
 New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features
- 10**  **Pioneer BDP-150 → £140 ★★★★★**  
 Affordable considering its Super Audio CD playback, Pioneer's BDP-150 is a worthy choice if you can live without much in the way of Smart functionality

## TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

**Matching your deck to your AV receiver:** Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

**What about the PlayStation 3?:** Sony's console ushered in the era of Blu-ray playback in 2006 and still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joystick is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most traditional BD spinners.



## DEMO DELIGHT

**Prometheus:** Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

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At the top of everyone's shortlist



## TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx  
and may have changed**Sony VPL-HW50ES** → £3,000

Another compelling example of Sony's rediscovered obsession with quality and a model that no one in the market for a mid-range projector can afford to ignore. Your film collection is in safe hands here

**JVC X55** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more flexible, second-gen iteration of JVC's e-shift pixel-polishing wizardry, the X55 offers supreme clarity as well as an impressive contrast and near-faultless 3D presentation

**JVC X35** → £2,900 ★★★★★

The £3,000 price point is the hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is definitely worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so!

**SIM2 Nero 3D-1** → £13,000 ★★★★★

That this isn't SIM2's most expensive model says a lot about the premium projector brand. Yet the DLP-based 3D-1 is still an awe-inspiring beamer, with 3D a particular strength

**Runco LightStyle LS1** → £4,000 ★★★★★

With a price tag not usually seen on Runco PJs, the LS1 is an excellent choice for those who aren't interested in 3D. This 2D-only DLP model offers brilliant HD pics and ISF certification

**Epson EH-TW8100** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W (below)? Then save yourself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead

**Panasonic PT-AT6000E** → £2,900 ★★★★★

Panasonic's newest PJ is undeniably a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't even get any 3D spex bundled in the box...

**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. But it's a bit noisy

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though

## TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



**Installation:** Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

**Throw distance:** Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

**Throw ratio:** Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed



**Wharfedale DX-1 HCP** → £400



You can spend a fortune on a 5.1 speaker set, but those on tight budgets aren't ignored. Wharfedale's affordable package looks gorgeous and sounds fantastic, with its tight, fast subwoofer underpinning the satellites with ease



**Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D** → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set from B&W sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too



**Q Acoustics Q2000i** → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub



**KEF R Series** → £6,500 ★★★★★

A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics



**SVS Ultra 7.1** → £7,150 ★★★★★

A big array (with both bookshelf and dipole designs), this is costly but definitely worth it. Deep, deep bass and soaring high-frequencies coming at you from all angles. Tasty



**Acoustic Energy 3 Series 5.1** → £2,000 ★★★★★

An easy-to-accommodate system using bookshelves both front and rear, this brilliantly built array creates a musical, cohesive soundfield backed up by an agile subwoofer



**DALI Epicon 5.1** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic



**KEF T205** → £1,500 ★★★★★

KEF's T Series brings high-quality sonics to your living room with the minimum of intrusion – these thin, flatpanel speakers are far more impressive than you might think



**Monitor Audio MASS 5.1** → £800 ★★★★★

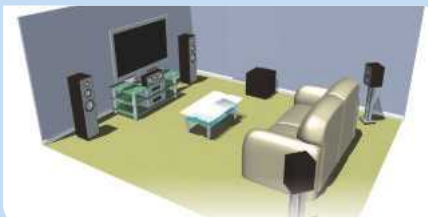
Five angular satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms



**KEF E305 5.1** → £900 ★★★★★

The living room-friendly looks of KEF's newest set of 'eggs' will ensure they get a lot of fans, and sound quality, courtesy of the brand's Uni-Q driver array, is superb

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



**Centre speaker:** Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

**Front speakers:** Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

**Subwoofer:** Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

**Surrounds:** Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

**Gladiator:** While it's often the low-end oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters



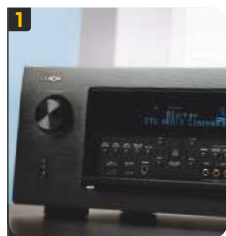
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## TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS/POWER AMPLIFIERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Denon AVR-4520** → £2,300

Denon's flagship AV receiver sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. Build quality is high and its networking talents impressive

**Sony STR-DA5800ES** → £2,200 ★★★★★

Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, VOD), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of excellent post-processing modes

**Onkyo TX-NR5010** → £3,000 ★★★★★

The top-of-the-range Onkyo warrants its £3,000 ticket by virtue of massive nine-channel power reserves and an extensive feature list. One for serious setups

**Denon AVR-3313** → £1,100 ★★★★★

Sonic detailing is the order of the day here, with the Denon crafting soundstages with considerable finesse. Spotify, Denon Link HD and triple HDMI outputs are the feature highlights

**Marantz AV8801** → £2,500 ★★★★★

The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance

**Pioneer SC-LX86** → £2,000 ★★★★★

As the Japanese corp's top dog, the SC-LX86 is packed with features and built to last. Get to grips with its detailed setup process and you're in for multichannel thrills

**Cambridge Audio Azur 751R** → £1,600 ★★★★★

Counting against the Azur 751R is its total lack of networking abilities and old-school interface, but its multichannel and stereo audio performance is hard to beat at this price

**Onkyo TX-NR626** → £500 ★★★★★

The new low/mid-range TX-NR626 offers onboard Wi-Fi and Bluetooth but no AirPlay. Its sound is dynamic and cohesive, although there's a slight hard edge to high frequencies

**Harman Kardon AVR 370** → £800 ★★★★★

One of the most sultry-looking models on the market, HK's mid-ranger offers 8-in, 2-out HDMI hookup, AirPlay and a classy audio performance. The app and UI could be better, though

**Pioneer VSX-923** → £450 ★★★★★

This affordable seven-channel AVR has a tight, clear audio presentation and plenty of features, but lacks the in-built Wi-Fi of its rivals – and usability could be improved

## TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



**Tackling new heights:** You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

**How much power?:** Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V671 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-Ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-Ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.



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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 

**1 Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★**  
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers
- 

**2 JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★**  
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these!
- 

**3 Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★**  
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, warm bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too
- 

**4 Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★**  
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast
- 

**5 REL Acoustics T-7 → £650 ★★★★★**  
The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features the brand's typical simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder
- 

**6 Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★**  
Possibly the coolest-looking subwoofer on the planet, B&W's revamped PV1 uses its DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class
- 

**7 Velodyne DD18+ → £5,800 ★★★★★**  
If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification
- 

**8 REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★**  
A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth
- 

**9 SVS SB12-NSD → £650 ★★★★★**  
A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though
- 

**10 Quadral Qube 10 → £525 ★★★★★**  
A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance

TECH INFO



**Why use more than one sub?:** Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

**Jurassic Park:** Steven Spielberg's dinosaur-packed blockbuster is rightly remembered for its cutting-edge CGI, but the surround sound mix is equally impressive. The Blu-ray release provides a perfect test for your subwoofer, with the ominous footfalls of the T-Rex so loud and low in the mix that you should find yourself as terrified as Jeff Goldblum's fast-talking mathematician. If you don't – well, you need a new woofer.

Top 5 HD GAMES



**Injustice: Gods Among Us**  
A beat 'em up incorporating a bevy of DC Comics characters (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman *et al*) sounds like a great idea – and it is. Accessible to novices and suprisingly fun in the single-player mode. Pow!  
★★★★★



**Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**  
Abandon all hope (of a life), ye who enter here. This third-person action RPG may not be the most visually impressive game around, but it will devour your every waking hour once started. Consider yourself warned...  
★★★★★



**BioShock Infinite**  
Irrational Games' sequel is a corker, offering a perfect mix of classy visuals, an engrossing narrative and, above all, superb gameplay. Start roaming the floating city of Columbia and you won't want to stop.  
★★★★★



**Dishonored**  
This first-person action-adventure puts you in the body of an assassin in a beautifully crafted steampunk world. Convincing characters and great sound design partnered with involving gameplay. We love it.  
★★★★★



**Tomb Raider**  
Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.  
★★★★★

## TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★**  
 Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, Devolo's dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. Performance and build are excellent
- 2 Western Digital WD TV Live Hub → £200 ★★★★★**  
 The WD's built-in 1TB hard drive explains the £200 ticket. This sleek-looking unit incorporates a faultless user interface and smartphone control, making media browsing a breeze
- 3 PSB M4U1 → £220 ★★★★★**  
 These closed-back 'phones are an excellent all-round offering – agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too
- 4 Crystal Acoustics Media Matchbox → £55 ★★★★★**  
 A dinky media player that will happily play nearly everything you throw at it, including MKV, FLAC and BD/DVD ISO files. Pocket-sized, wallet-friendly and fuss free
- 5 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**  
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be a tad expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast
- 6 Bose Companion 20 → £200 ★★★★★**  
 These desktop speakers have a plasticky build, but the beefy performance they offer for the price can't be sniffed at – and the hardwired remote proves rather cool
- 7 One For All Simple 4 → £22 ★★★★★**  
 A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control. One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys
- 8 Asheridge echoBox → £140 ★★★★★**  
 An innovative alternative to Powerline Ethernet, the echoBox uses your home's coax cabling to shunt data, which could be ideal depending on your configuration. £140 gets you a pair of units
- 9 DVDO Air → £350 ★★★★★**  
 Built around the WiDi standard, this wireless HD sender handles Full HD (including 3D) video and multichannel audio. Build quality and design is good, performance hard to fault
- 10 Corsair Voyager Air → £180 ★★★★★**  
 A Wi-Fi-enabled portable hard drive (1TB), also with Ethernet hookup, the smart-looking Voyager Air is an ideal partner for smartphone/tablet users. No DLNA media server on board, tho'

## TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



**What about my TV?:** Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

**Storage:** You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

## TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season**

Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.

★★★★★

**Indiana Jones: The Complete Adventures**

Although the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restoration isn't the best we've seen, this is a box set that no home cinema fan can afford to be without. And ...*Temple of Doom* is uncut, too!

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**True Blood: The Complete Fifth Season**

More quality TV from HBO in a fan-pleasing BD box set. Imagery is commendable, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes are surprisingly forceful, and there are loads of extras to sink your fangs into.

★★★★★

**The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: Extended Edition**

Peter Jackson's box office-breaking trilogy simply dazzles in HD, and these extended cuts are perfect for Middle Earth maniacs. Watch the movies then savour the 26 hours of extras.

★★★★★



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**Yamaha RX-A1020  
+ Marantz UD7007**

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**Marantz SR7007  
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+ Wharfedale DX-1 HCP (5.1)**

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**Yamaha RX-V673  
+ DALI ZENSOR 5 (5.1)**

~~£1928~~ **£1319**



**Yamaha RX-A1020  
+ Dali Zensor 5 (5.1)**

~~£2428~~ **£1699**



**Denon AVR-X2000  
+ DALI ZENSOR 5 (5.1)**

~~£1928~~ **£1419**



**Yamaha RX-A1020  
+ Q Acoustics 2000i (5.1)**

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**Yamaha RX-A3020  
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## TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★

**Sky+HD, £subscription**

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250**

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★

**Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350**

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★

**Samsung BD-F8500, £300**

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options – it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the EPG environment

★★★★★

## TOP 5 SOUNDBARS

**Yamaha YSP-2200, £800**

Launched back in 2011, but still part of the Yamaha lineup, this premium-priced 'Digital Sound Projector' offers very effective virtual surround, a separate 100W subwoofer and 3-in, 1-out HDMI switching

★★★★★

**Sonos PlayBar, £600**

Sonos' debut 'bar offers a hefty, spacious sound (although it doesn't come with a sub) and it can be easily added to an existing Sonos network for music-on-demand fun. Only connects to your TV via optical

★★★★★

**Philips HTL5120, £250**

An affordable 'bar that offers no separate sub, Philips' slender model still sounds great, bringing a smooth, silky mid-range, sparkling high-frequencies and a decent dollop of oomph. And it packs twin HDMI inputs

★★★★★

**Samsung HW-E450, £250**

HDMI connectivity, wireless subwoofer hookup, Bluetooth streaming and USB file playback help this well-priced 'bar stand out from the crowd. Audio performance is solid, too – but lossless tracks aren't catered for

★★★★★

**Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650**

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

## TOP 5 SYSTEMS

**Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630**

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★

**Samsung HT-F9750W, £1,500**

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome sound; packed with features

★★★★★

**Harman Kardon BDS470, £650**

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★

**LG BH8220B, £650**

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★

**Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350**

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

# HOME CINEMA

## Choice

## → IN THE NEXT ISSUE

**Film censorship:** Why the video nasty debate of the 1980s wasn't the end of it...

**Brothers in amps:** Behind the scenes with Denon and Marantz

**EISA Awards:** The best AV you can buy

## → ON TEST

**Arcam AVR750 receiver** **Finlux 55S9100 LED TV** **Quadral Signo Avantgarde 5.1** **Panasonic Blu-ray recorder** **JVC X75 projector** **Smart TV group test** **Philips HTL9100 soundbar** **PLUS** News, software, opinion, installs and more!

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**Aug 22**



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# POINT OF VIEW

In a moment of epiphany, **Richard Stevenson** discovers that soundbars are a great way of improving his TV's sonics without upsetting the domestic apple cart

**I HAVE BEEN** turned. Having being derisive and scathing about soundbars for as long as I can remember, my opinion has been massaged by the performance and spousal acceptance of one of the breed. You see, soundbars have not and never will deliver proper home cinema sound. They are too small, the left and right channels are too close together and those that do try to integrate rear effects never quite succeed. Yet they are damn popular with the proletariat. The UK soundbar market has been doubling in value every year for the last five years and in 2013 is expected to crest the key £100m mark. That is a whole lot of soundbars.

By and large they are far from perfect. They don't match up cosmetically with your TV and often look like they have to be hung on the wall as an afterthought (which they mostly are). And the performance has been up there with the sort of sound quality that chunkier TVs could achieve about 15 years ago. So much for progress.

Knowing my opinion, UK distributor RedLine bravely suggested I try out a Studio 39-SB soundbar from the US brand Artison. Being the sceptical sort, I said no thanks. Quite a few times actually, but they were insistent. The trouble is the only suitable TV for soundbar installation is in my living room, which is the wife's sanctuary from the chaos of AV hardware. She's strict on that too, making one of my wedding vows 'I promise to love, honour, obey and keep the living room free of electronics.'

Eventually I succumbed, and set about the high-risk strategy of installing the Studio 39 while she was out. The Artison came with mounting hardware that attaches to the TV bracket, meaning no holes or drilling required, and a custom-made grill was supplied to match the exact width of the TV. This is a £95 add-on to the soundbar's £800 ticket,

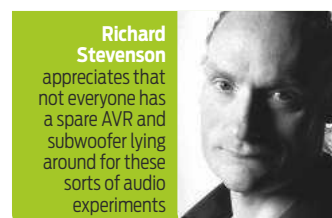
but resulted in seamless integration. It looked just like the TV was designed with an area at the bottom covered with speaker cloth.

Now, here's the controversial bit: the Studio 39-SB is a passive 'bar. It offers individual left-, centre- and right-channel speakers in a single box, each with rather serious Vifa tweeters and carbon midrange drivers. As such it requires a separate amplifier. I concealed a Pioneer VSX-922 in a nearby cabinet, with speaker leads threaded through the existing trunking, and slipped a compact sub down beside the sofa. After running the setup on the Pioneer we were ready to go.

Performance wise, it provided a small step on the ladder to home cinema heaven and a giant leap for soundbar kind. It sounded rich, punchy and powerful with fabulous dialogue articulation. Blimey, a soundbar that actually thrills! But that was not the only revelation. Cautiously introducing the missus to the install she was immediately impressed by its discreetness, which allowed me to remove my rolling-pin-proof hard hat. I switched on the TV and amp to give her a demonstration and she was, frankly, blown away. I left the house, leaving her playing Take That's *Progress Live* on Blu-ray at serious volume. Ironically, I could hear the strains of *Let Me Entertain You* as I pulled out of the drive.

Two weeks later and she fires up the 'bar by default when watching TV. *EastEnders* at over 90dB I can personally live without but this whole episode demonstrates why the soundbar market is booming – non AV enthusiasts just love convenience and discreet design – and that even those snuffy about performance can have their misconceptions blown away, albeit by an atypical offering ■

Have you installed a soundbar in your house?  
Let us know: email [letters@homecinemachoice.com](mailto:letters@homecinemachoice.com)



**Richard Stevenson** appreciates that not everyone has a spare AVR and subwoofer lying around for these sorts of audio experiments





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